

Back Again, Back Again: The Beginning and the End

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode one: the Beginning and the End.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I don't even know how to begin.

Jesus christ. Why am I doing this? Who would listen, right?
Who would believe me --

(Breath out, gasping.)

Shit. *Quonoc per domi*. This is home -- no this is -- no. I
just --

(In full voice) I'm seventeen again. And that's... wrong.

I'm sorry. I don't know where to begin.

I used to be -- more. I think. Unless it was all a dream.
Unless it was all just -- it couldn't've been --

It's September twenty-fourth, two thousand nineteen. I'm
seventeen. I turned out my lights at eleven thirty-eight and
fell asleep a handful of minutes before midnight and then I woke
up at twelve-o-three and five years had passed, but not here. I
was -- somewhere else -- and I was a king.

And -- And I'm not making any sense. I -- I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Sorry. Let me try again.

Do you know *The Hobbit*? Bilbo wrote a book of his adventure, mentioned more in Fellowship but that's semantics. *There and Back Again: A Hobbit's Tale*.

Now... I'm going to recount everything. Like -- like Bilbo. Because I don't want to forget. Because I want the world to know, even if they know nothing else about me. Because it all seems less like a -- fever dream written down. Because who else would believe me? Who else would believe everything I've seen? Who else would -- listen?

Even if there's no one out there. I just -- want to think someone is listening.

I'll call it -- (laughs/snorts) I'll call it -- *There and Back Again: A Lost Girl's Tale*.

There and Back Again: A King's Tale.

No. No -- that's stupid.

How about just...

Back Again, Back Again.

Fitting. I guess.

I'm still not making any sense.

I went to sleep a handful of minutes before midnight. It's Georgia, and September, and that means it's still ninety degrees. It was ninety-four yesterday. This-yesterday. Here-yesterday. I had to check the weather -- I couldn't remember exactly. I just remembered hot as balls. So -- I didn't wear pants to sleep which sounds weird until you've been to Georgia. It's sticky-walls humid, which shouldn't even be legal, but weather doesn't abide by mortal legalities.

No pants. Just an oversized t-shirt I'd gotten at a thrift store with The Hobbit logo done on it in black, the t-shirt an ugly golden-yellow color.

This is important. Not protag-mirror-description exposition. Because -- when I woke up at twelve-o-three, I was in battle clothes. Leather pants and a linen shirt and a leather breastplate and bracers. They were bloodstained and half-ruined. I was breathing hard and light-headed in the way you are right after you get done screaming. There had been a battle. We had won. I had just won and then I got stabbed and I opened my mouth to scream and --

It was twelve-o-three. I was seventeen where I used to be twenty-three.

I used to be twenty-three.

Because... gods, it sounds so stupid saying it. I can't believe that I'm saying this -- but it can't've been fake -- it couldn't've just been a dream, dreams aren't *this real*.

Five minutes or something-close passed here, in this world. But I was... somewhere different. I was Narnia-ed through a doorway in space-time or -- really -- was more lucky than I've been in my entire life, and I was Somewhere Else. Capitalized, emphasized.

We call it Rhysea. I don't know how I got there, but this is my call to find home. This is me screaming into the void and hoping the void screams back, somehow. This is me begging to go back. And... this is me trying to not forget.

(Sigh) The point is, when I woke up, I was here. In clothes that were not-from-here in a body that was only sort-of from here, but -- here. I freaked out and took a midnight shower and

hid in the shower in my bloody clothes from Elsewhere while my father knocked on the door, asking why I was awake and in the shower at midnight on a school night. He wished me a happy birthday, ironically, in the sort of tone that implied he wished he hadn't been awake to be able to have done that.

I'd almost forgotten what his voice had sounded like. Hearing it was a -- shock. A memory, half buried.

It couldn't have been a dream.

And you don't care about what came after. How blankly I walked through school on my second seventeenth birthday, how teachers I didn't remember the names of asked me if I was alright because *I was never this quiet, this downtrodden, why wasn't I answering their questions in class? Why didn't I have my homework? My backpack?*

I'd left it at home. It hadn't seemed important.

What was important -- what is, *is* important, is my dr--. Not-dream. Is Rhysea. Is the magic that no longer hums through my body where it used to be so certain.

I fell asleep just before midnight. I woke up on a dirt road in the pouring rain with a horse bearing down on me. I yelped and tumbled off the road -- into a ditch full of nasty mud-water that reeked like shit and dead things. The cart-driver yelled at me as he barreled by, words indistinguishable amid the pounding of the rain and the pounding of my heart, echoing in my ears.

This was not Georgia. The trees were all the wrong sorts, too ancient and vast and it was much too cold -- summer balminess lacking the oppressive heat I'd come to know. It felt

like the northwest. It smelled like a back alley. It was the middle of the goddamned morning.

A *dream*, I'd thought. It had seemed like a dream at first -- everything off just enough to be odd. It felt like a dream, in that way -- your surroundings not quite how reality otherwise behaved, in the waking world, a shade too silver, nothing in perfect focus until you force your brain to *look*. Like thinking through molasses. Like running and getting nowhere, like not being able to control your body. I'm a lucid dreamer, here in this world. Thinking *this is a dream* isn't a sign of consciousness.

But I could feel the rain -- it didn't slide off my skin or leave vague static in place of true sensation. The ditch-water soaking into my shirt was disgustingly present, the rain drumming onto my scalp and the bridge of my nose the same way it did in the middle of a thunderstorm. Though I can't ever smell things in my dreams, the smell of refuse was overpowering. I stumbled out of the ditch and back onto the road.

It was completely deserted. Anyone with sense wasn't out in the pouring rain.

The second hint of not-here was a lack of something, rather than the presence of. It took me too long to realize -- it's harder to notice something's missing than it is to identify an oddity. See, no Chick-Fil-A cups or wal-mart bags blew across the road. No mile markers or road signs on metal posts scattered themselves along the sides, announcing *you are here, you are here*.

And the third thing --

Not knowing what else to do, pantsless in the pouring rain, I started to walk. When you're sopping wet, dear listener, with hair sticking to your face and mud covering your feet and your thighs starting to chafe in a way you couldn't believe they had the audacity to do, time suspends itself in a way that's not quite fair. I slogged along, becoming less and less convinced this all was a dream, because my subconscious wasn't clever enough to dream up *thigh chafing*, for gods' sake, for longer than I wanted but likely less time than I made it out to be, until I came to a fork in the road, a division off of what-was. To the left, more open road, for as far as I could see until the not-right trees and thick rain swallowed up the path. On the right, lining the road between clumps of trees and patches of farm, a collection of houses -- though *cottages* might have been a better word. A way out of the rain.

I ended up in a family's backyard, their laundry strung on clotheslines across the yard, forgotten to the storm. Guilt bubbled up as the idea of stealing from them cemented itself in my mind, and I hesitated before swallowing it down and instead praying the reason they hadn't pulled the clothes in -- all in a peasant-from-a-fantasy-novel sort of style -- was because they weren't home. Those clothes -- another sign I wasn't home, another sign, by the detail that I hadn't dreamt them up. Nothing was that detailed in my dreams. That, and I hadn't been able to will the rain to stop via god powers of lucid dreaming.

It was somewhere in that moment I started to realize that I was in a place completely foreign to everything I'd known. Anxiety replaced annoyance until that, too, started to sap to a

sort of incredulous excitement, even as the rain pounded down and I could still smell shit water on my clothes.

This wasn't my world. Not anything I'd ever heard of or seen. Escape from mundanity was all I'd ever wanted, and now here was a promise of some sort of adventure. Here was some sort of Narnia, some sort of new world to discover.

I was pulling down a dress that looked roughly my size when the back door to the cottage swung open. A woman stood in the doorway, laundry basket on her hip. It clattered to the ground when she saw me, and I tensed, preparing to run.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out.
"Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role that no one else can fill but you. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Back Again, Back Again: Swords and Magic

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode two: Swords and Magic.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: The woman's face lost its' color. I froze, waiting to see what she would do. *If she starts towards me, I'll run.* I thought, planning out my escape into the great unknown. *I'll hide in the woods, I'll take the fork left. I won't get arrested for... clothes theft?* Because at the time, that was what I was worried about. I hadn't known why she would go pale from... me, instead of shouting, instead of reacting with anger. Whatever I know now, at the time I thought it was because a muddy girl was standing in her yard and stealing her dresses.

But she didn't drive me away. Instead, she started towards me, slowly, arms outstretched and fingers splayed like I was a stray cat she was trying to coax inside. The woman murmured something under her breath -- in a language I couldn't understand, but it was calm. It was meant to soothe me, I could tell. Her dark hair began to plaster to her face in the rain, but she continued to move towards me with slow, deliberate steps.

She reached me, still murmuring something I couldn't pick apart. I froze, deer-in-headlights, waiting for the other shoe to drop, for something to snap. One hand still clutched the clothesline dress.

The woman peeled her jacket from her shoulders. Every action was slow, deliberate, like she realized how close I was to booking it, this feral thing in her yard. She draped the jacket around my shoulders and smiled softly, her eyes crinkling. The woman smelled like jasmine and pine. The world seemed softer as she put her hand on my shoulder.

I didn't know what she was saying, but the meaning was clear. *The weather is too poor to be out in the rain. Come inside. It's okay.*

So I let her lead me inside, this woman soft and motherly amid the pouring rain and yelling people and unfamiliarity. She pulled down a pair of trousers from the line, wet through but so was I, and handed them to me. I clutched them to my chest as she brought me through the doorway -- her hand stayed on the small of my back until she sat me down in her kitchen and plunked a bowl of -- porridge -- or something of the sort in front of me. The bowl was a red-brown like the not-right trees outside. It looked hand-carved.

I was hesitantly beginning to eat when a man climbed down the ladder from the loft, holding one baby tight to his chest and helping two others, older, down after him. He, too, stopped dead when he saw me, and as the younger girls rushed along to the table, setting the baby into her seat and taking their own as their mother plunked porridge in front of them, the man called to his wife, his tone the sort you use when you see a copperhead on the path in front of you. They spoke in a tongue I didn't recognize, his tone hard and hers somewhere between plying and nonchalant, still as gentle as the one she used to bring me inside. The message was clear: *don't scare her*.

He moved to the table and scooped up the baby, bouncing her on his hip as he fed her with his free hand. The man shot me a

look, piercing and full. *I know what you bring*, his eyes said, but he broke our stare before I lost my nerve and looked away.

The two little girls peered at me over their own bowls of oatmeal as their mother breezily sat glasses of milk in front of each of them. She smacked the back of the eldest's head, and snapped something that made her glance away. Again, the message was clear: *It's rude to stare*.

It's fine, I finally said, in English, the default I reverted to. *She's okay*.

The man and woman exchanged another look -- darker this time. They didn't respond, but it confirmed... something with them. He nodded. The woman fiddled with her spoon.

The man said something more hurriedly -- a confirmation -- and after a tense nod from the woman, sent the children back upstairs as they finished eating before disappearing out the front door, throwing a cloak over his shoulders and storming out into the rain.

What? I said as the man left. *I'm sorry to have intruded -- Should I leave?*

She sighed and slid into the chair opposite me. Before I could flinch she grabbed my hands, pulling them into her own.

She stared into my eyes as she spoke, prying, suppliant. It was an apology, a last-chance.

I stared blankly back.

She sighed once more and left me to finish my porridge.

I was scraping the bottom of the bowl when the door was knocked open, slamming against the wall behind it with a crack like the thunder outside. Soldiers -- that was the only way they could be described -- *soldiers*, like medieval knights -- came storming in. The woman backed up against the kitchen counter, pressing herself as far away from them as possible and pulling her hands up in a defense as they began to shout. The one in the lead barked something to her, and she pointed at me.

Her eyes held an apology. I jumped to my feet.

They were pulling back my arms and shoving me down before I could run -- or fight -- or -- anything. I'm not sure what my response would've been beyond *panic*.

Because *panic* had set in, sure and certain. Panic was real and full and I was yelling at the guards, telling them to let me go, that I didn't know what they were saying or what I'd done wrong. The woman had given me the coat. I hadn't stolen anything.

The woman stood pale-faced. I cast around and looked to her desperately -- *why?* -- but she didn't move her planted feet. Instead, she hesitated for half a second before making a gesture -- fingers curled into a fist with the thumb pressed straight against it -- and dragged that fist from shoulder to shoulder, then out towards me, two fingers crossed like a broken promise.

The gesture turns out to mean a lot of things. It can be a blessing for travel. An apology. And it's a sign of respect, for a lot of people. I don't know which one she was using it for. I didn't know any of the meanings, then.

I cursed at her. Not that she knew what I was saying. Not that I had known what she was saying.

The soldiers pulled me outside and shoved me to my knees. It was still raining outside, just as violently as before -- mud seeped through the trousers the woman gave me and turned my knees to ice. They bound my hands behind me with coarse rope and pulled a cloth over my eyes, and as I strained my ears, blind, my words useless and my mind nearly overwhelmed, I made out two words from the entropy around me. *Vatakina eligida*. I held on to them, because they sounded right. Because the lead soldier -- he's important, but not yet -- said it with such force that it had to be powerful.

They are. The words, I mean. *Vatakina eligida*. It means *chosen child*. *Prophecy child*.

They were talking about me.

But I didn't know that yet.

All my will to run left me the second I stopped being able to see. I could still feel the soldiers around me, but the idea of stumbling through the village off-kilter and blind and falling into another ditch -- or breaking something -- or being shot in the back as I tried to run was enough to rocket my anxiety up to an eleven. So I stayed, on my knees in the rain in the yard of the woman who fed me, trying to figure out what was going on, breathing hard, chest tight. Lost in noise I couldn't pick apart, lost without lips to read and written words to assign to the sounds I heard. Lost in a language I didn't understand.

A horse whinnied, fearful.

A soldier pulled me to my feet and shoved -- two-handed, solid and intentional. I stumbled forward, blind, and hit -- a horse. Wet and warm and alive.

Somehow I ended up on top of it, balanced precariously in the saddle, as a soldier climbed on behind me. I was struggling

not to lose my balance when the soldier grabbed the reins and kicked the horse, and I slammed back into his chest.

Let me tell you, it's a distinctly uncomfortable feeling to ride a horse blind and with your hands tied behind you. You're pin-balled between the soldier's arms that're circling you and, due the fact that you're trying really hard not to fall off -- thus, you're in rather -- uh -- close proximity to your captor -- you can feel soldier-boy's crotch pressing into your back. You're trying not to think about it. You're kind of wanting to fall off the horse because you don't know if it's your imagination or it's getting harder.

I had more than convinced myself I was awake by this point -- I couldn't dream soldier dick this vividly -- but counting seconds wasn't working like it should've. I kept losing track.

The rain faded to a drizzle, then became nothing but curling humidity, steam rising from the dirt. My blindfold was pulled off, a chunk of my hair with it, a side-effect of curls and rain.

A palace unfolded around me, archways and stonework and more people than I could count, all rushing to help the battalion down and into the courtyard. I was pulled off the

horse and soldiers surrounded me as I stumbled, all still in their helmets -- faceless and more unsettling for it.

With the ability to see once more came the urge to run, adrenaline and fear creating something potent in my chest.

But there were a lot of people, and most of them were armed. Not guns -- swords and daggers. Some had quivers slung over their backs. A few of the soldiers had what looked to be crossbows. I didn't want to get stabbed or otherwise impaled, so as the lead soldier dismounted from his horse and began to stride through the halls, I marched along with the rest of them.

It was gorgeous. God, everything a castle should be. Grand and old, made of statues and parapets and stained glass and rooflines that looked meant for climbing.

We halted -- *halted*, like soldiers, instead of just merely stopping -- outside of a set of double-doors, elaborate and gleaming, inlaid with gold and carved with a crest of crossed swords and a lion's face.

The people that dogged the soldier's steps as they marched drifted back, and the lead soldier -- the one that called me *eligida* -- knocked.

The doors swung open with a near-silent *whoosh* borne from oil and solid, heavy wood.

It was a throne room -- even more opulent than the doors outside. Everything was golden and glittering, or made of glossy wood tinted red-gold by huge stained-glass windows. Courtiers in elaborate clothing -- dresses and brocade shirts, silk and embroidery and fabric painted so intricately it must've taken weeks -- lined the walls like artwork themselves. They twittered as the lead soldier gave me a half-push forward, made a sweeping motion that clearly meant *after you*. Or, maybe, just *walk*.

Listener, you're never more aware of how disastrous and half-drowned you must look until you're on display in a room of royalty. Royalty -- because who else could these people be? It was a damn castle. The lead soldier, a step or two behind me, began to shadow my shaky walk down the aisle.

I wrapped the woman's coat closer around myself and tried not to look frightened.

Far down at the very end of the hall a king and queen sat on gilded thrones. The king's crown was crooked, the queen's lips pressed together in a way that broadcasted her distaste. The stares of the court carried their own weight, but the king and queen -- both dressed in dark blues and golden highlights, the queen with tightly coiled hair pulled up and away from her brown face, countenance the definition of museum-perfect, and

the king, eyes watery-pale that moved around like a man running calculations -- they were something else entirely. The king was some shade of pale, I would have guessed, but currently red as a lobster, sunburnt to the core. He waved away the man at the foot of their thrones, who was bowing and scraping in a plea for -- something. He was gone by the time I was close enough to take his place.

I stopped near ten feet back from the foot of the three stairs that led to their thrones, cowed by the guards halted behind me.

The lead soldier was still at my back. He did not let me retreat further. Before I could get a word out or have the sense to avert my eyes instead of staring openly like a fool at the kings of this castle, my knees buckled as the soldier swept them out from under me. I slammed to the floor, forced into a kneel, as pain radiated up my legs when they made contact with the stone floor.

Dead silence. And then --

Who is this? The king said -- in English.

English. In this land of anything but. Gods, I was so shocked that the throbbing in my knees subsided for just a

moment. After an afternoon of not knowing a word, this was -- beyond strange.

The lead guard stepped out from behind me, and I flicked my eyes up just enough to watch as he took off his helmet, shaking out his curly dark hair. He was the spitting image of the couple on the thrones before me -- umber-skinned, dark haired, like the woman on the throne. Tall and sharp, like the man. He was a prince. Their son.

The girl that changes everything, he said, also in English. *Dressed in gold. Hair of fire. Magic in her veins.*

This was met with expressions of shock from the kings on the thrones, but the court did not react the same way -- just kept staring, waiting, leaning into the stillness. The English had escaped them. I took just a moment to be pissed that this boy rode beside me for hours and never let on that he knew what I was saying the whole goddamned way before the pale king spoke again.

Prove her, he said, and the prince hauled me to my feet and pulled open my coat to reveal my shitty golden hobbit shirt.

The reaction, this time, was palpable throughout the entirety of the court. There was crescendoing noise and the

prince-boy took a step up behind me -- as if in protection -- as they clamoured for a closer look.

I was infinitely grateful to have been wearing pants, at this point.

One word started to filter through the din: *Enarbol*. It took up among the people like a chant, becoming greater and greater -- *enarbol. Enarbol. Enarbol*, until the queen stood, and with a lift of her hand, brought everything back to silence -- this silence weighted down with anticipation.

In the other-language she spoke, her voice ringing through the hall with far more authority than the man stood beside her. The boy-prince translated for me, low and close to my ear. I didn't know if it was better that way -- my knees still smarted, telling me he was not to be trusted. They bruised by morning.

But it was help, and it was understanding, something I needed desperately in this world.

We will take her to it, he translated, *and we will let Them decide.*

Enarbol means *great tree*. Or -- *last tree*, depending on how you translate. Both are, objectively, true. I still hadn't known that, at the time. I thought it was a person.

At the ushering of the queen, the court swarmed out through the lion-gold doors. I was pulled along, the prince-boy behind me and miles of silk brocade ahead of me, chatter all around in language unintelligible to my foreign ears. I worried, for a minute, that this was some kind of execution we were headed to -- because it seemed appropriately medieval, but the excitement wasn't underlaced with death. It was -- hope, that ran underneath it all.

An odd feeling.

Back through the echoing corridors, back along the almost-indoor castle archways, back past the eyes of the watching servants. They gaped beneath their averted glances, and added onto the herd moving out as they caught sight of the kings and -- me.

They stopped in a clearing, bottled up ahead of where the prince and I lagged towards the back of the group. He had one hand on my arm, having been sort-of-pulling sort-of-guiding me along, and as they all turned, in a -- wave -- to look to me, he let go.

I swallowed and tried not to cower.

And -- they parted, the court did, and at the prompting of the prince, low and soft in English -- his mouth barely moving

-- I walked, shakily, towards the giant tree they'd revealed at the center.

Twisted and spiraling up towards the sky, leaves thick with green and the veins through the leaves almost seeming to run -- gold -- I stopped at the base of it. My head tilted back -- so far I almost fell back over -- as I stared up into the canopy.

It was ancient -- that was easy enough to tell. It's -- hard to quantify, exactly, how *There* a tree becomes after this long of life. There, capital T, emphasised. There, as in -- *sentient* seems wrong. *Alive* isn't extraordinary. It -- had a presence, like nothing you see in pine forests and spindly beech reaching up for the sky before they're ready.

Do you know the redwood forests, in Washington? The trees are giant, yes, but friendly rather than imposing. They welcome people to walk among them. They're ancient and have seen more than you could ever know, but they're kinder for it. The air around them is so -- still, too. It's Cakeswater, but without any threat of night terror. It's stillness and welcoming, in that gentle, homely sort of way. Peaceful. It's -- *There*-ness. Capital T.

It was all of that, and more. The world hummed -- not externally, no resonation in the air, but it was as if something

had activated in my blood and the world shifted into clearer focus.

I found myself at the base of the tree. It called to me still, that gentle slow murmuring of sunlight. And, half still caught up in the presence of it all, I reached out and brushed my hand along the trunk.

The Enarbol was ridged with age, resistant to change all around it. Smooth, if you ran your fingertips over it the right direction. And where I expected my hand to stop there, the gentle calling of my blood with this creature greater than myself -- it pulled me in: in my hand went, in a halting, yanking, sort of way, and then -- light encapsulated my vision. The summer sun at eight-fifteen: that perfect golden glow that catches your eyes and turns everything to fire.

It felt like I was on fire. I think I screamed, but no one touched me -- or, if they did, my nerve endings were too alight for it to make any sort of difference.

My other hand found the tree, and it did not sink in. I stumbled backwards, my palm within the tree closed around something and I didn't even realize it until the light faded from my vision into a soft greenness that clouded the periphery of my sight.

A sword. Like Arthurian legend, like this was Caliburn pulled from stone.

My blood sang. The sword began to glow, green-gold running along the fuller until the whole thing was alight.

I raised my sword, dizzy with the magic in my veins.

Vatakina eligida, I heard, somewhere behind me. As if I were listening to the radio from another room.

Prophecy Child.

The light swelled, green-gold glow filling my vision once more, and I fell to the grass.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the

page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role that no one else can fill but you. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Back Again, Back Again: King, Part 1

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode three: King.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I woke up in a bed, rather than the ground I'd been expecting as I came back into a strange half-conscious state.

And -- it wasn't my bed, in Georgia, which was what the other half of my subconscious had still been expecting. No fan ticked overhead. No fairy lights shone back at me, quiet incandescence.

No. I was still... there, that other-place, feeling odd and yet more like myself than I had in my entire life. Magic trilled

in my chest, the same strange power I'd felt before passing out in the courtyard with the Enarbol.

It was real, whatever had happened. I was -- *eligida*. Chosen by -- someone. Something.

A girl sat at the end of the bed, bronze-skinned and long-haired, one braid trailing over her shoulder and tied with a ribbon. She traced the lines of embroidery on the blanket with one hand, fingers gently running along the stitches. She hadn't realized I was awake.

This girl is important. We become friends, but not right now. There's still miles to go before we're there.

I realized, with a jolt, that the sword I'd pulled from the tree wasn't around me -- the loss was sharp and sudden, an ache in my chest that settled into an off-kitler buzz. The girl startled into focus as I pushed myself upright, heart pounding as I scanned the room.

It was -- wrong. For the sword to not be with me.

Even then, having just woken up, I could feel it -- the magic in my blood. And how it called out for what the ancient tree had given me.

I --

I still find myself reaching for the magic. Searching for the glow that used to come so easily -- to call the will of the earth to my side and to conjure -- *something*.

I haven't. Been able to. And it's --

I --

I don't like it. Being this empty.

Where's my sword? I asked her, half-feral. She flinched, just slightly, and I only just had time to remember that no one here seemed to know English beside the prince and kings before she responded, carefully, eyes still set on the embroidery of the blanket.

It is outside, she said, *right where you left it when you... fell.*

I need it, I said, hungrily, but she didn't move. I opened my mouth to try and explain the tugging in my chest, but before I could, the strange girl spoke again.

We could not touch it.

What?

We could not touch it, she repeated. *To bring it inside. It is... too much.*

I was too preoccupied to dissect what the hell that implied. *Please,* I said. *I need it. I -- what's your name?*

She lifted her head, finally. Her eyes were dark as night, lashes long and full around them. *Rhia*, she responded.

Rhia, I said. *I'm Ilyaas. Please help me.*

Ilyaas, she repeated carefully. *Hello.*

Please, I echoed, and she nodded, so I clambered from the bed, almost running to the door.

Rhia caught my hand. *Not yet. You can not leave while you are wearing that.*

I looked down. The hobbit shirt stared back.

I don't have other clothes, I said, finally.

She grinned, a little thing she tried to push down, tongue pressed to the backs of her teeth. *It's okay*, she said, *we have prepared for a long time.*

It was as we found clothes that I asked her how she knew English, if so few did. And it was as I dressed that she explained it to me -- my back to her, her eyes trained on the bedspread's embroidery, fingers skimming the patterns in polite propriety.

I am the only person in the castle that does, she explained, *besides the prince and the kings. Ever since the first soldier/poet/king, there has been one daughter of Rhysea that learns, in case the new Eligida is of their time.*

That's what this place is? I asked. *Rhysea.*

Yes, she said, and lapsed back into silence as I tried to figure out the laces on my new boots.

And you know English -- at her odd expression, I corrected *-- my language -- in order to...*

Teach you our own. And to help you through.

I see, I said, and paused, an odd stutter in my chest. *Friend,* my heart said, but I tried not to get too ahead of myself. *Thank you.*

She smiled another tiny perfect smile. I turned around. *I'm ready to go.*

She nodded. *You look better.*

The shirt -- thing -- was long-sleeved, the sleeves just slightly puffed Shakespeare-style, and off-white, a ribbon running through at an empire waist to pull in what was an otherwise loose shirt at the back. Golden flowers ran up the sleeves towards my shoulders as if I'd grasped the hands of Midas. Leather boots, mid-calf height, hugged my legs.

We joke about stomping boots here, right? Boots that're meant to fight in. These were of the same stuff.

Thank you, I said, and grinned. *Can we find my sword now?*

She hesitated, for just a second, a slight back-and-forth in place before seeming to make up her mind.

Come on, Rhia said, starting for the door. *It will still be in the courtyard -- where you dropped it.*

I followed her out and closed the door behind us. The hallways were tall-ceilinged and wide, made of old stone and lamplight. This was the first time the lack of electric light truly hit me. The court was glass-ceilinged. It was bright as day, there. The room I'd just been in, too, had a large window.

There were no windows along here.

Three hallways and a staircase melted into a grand foyer, which became the open-aired halls like you see in Harry Potter movies.

And then we were outside, and Rhia started to run, so I sprinted after her in my boots and Midas-stained shirt and I was so focused on her, on not looking like a fool, that I didn't even realize the tree until we were at its' base, the canopy pulling us in. It seemed different than before -- the leaves, I realized, as one fell past my face, had become veined in coppery-gold.

I caught it as it went by. Rhia pointed to the sword, strewn across the grass where it had fallen. My blood hummed as

I picked it up, somehow expecting the jolt that struck through me as everything once again slid into focus.

The sword once more began to glow. This time, I had a better chance to inspect it as I raised it up: engravings decorated the blade, miniscule lines of script and scenes of girls -- three girls, repeated over and over along the blade -- one singing, carrying a stringed instrument as gold and and wind sighed from her mouth, another with a sword raised, a crooked crown on her brow, and a third, hands cast outward, as magic bloomed from her palms. And they repeated together, as well, embracing and riding and fighting, back-to-back, against an army of men. Flowers curled around the story-scenes, blooms like peonies and lily-of-the-valley cradling the girls on the blade. Rhia's breath caught as she stared at it.

What does it say? I asked carefully, tilting the blade back and forth so the engravings caught the light.

Rhia peered at the writings, carved along the base of the blade, close to the guard. *They will tear your city down*, she said carefully, *The soldier and poet and king.*

I know those words by heart. *Perit perriber civitat de ilms, rex et poeta et soldat.*

We -- and you, you who bears this sword -- will make collapse this city. Will overthrow what came before, you soldier and poet and king.

Or: go and tear this city down.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

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Back Again, Back Again: King, Part 2

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode four: King, Part Two.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: *What does it say?* I asked carefully, tilting the blade back and forth so the engravings caught the light.

Rhia peered at the writings, carved along the base of the blade, close to the guard. *They will tear your city down,* she said carefully, *The soldier and poet and king.*

I know those words by heart. *Perit perriber civitad de ilms, rex et poeta et soldat.*

We -- and you, you who bears this sword -- will make collapse this city. Will overthrow what came before, you soldier and poet and king.

Or: go and tear this city down.

But I couldn't yet translate for myself, and what she said was true enough.

Who are they? I asked. *The soldier and poet and king.*

Rhia grimaced and frowned just slightly, seeming to pick her words carefully. *They are why you are here. And all will be explained, but not by me.*

And then, suddenly, occurred to me a question I should've thought to ask a long time before: *If you know English -- if you know this language, the language I speak, are you royal, too?* As I asked, I flinched: I'd assumed she wasn't, in the way she'd stood and dressed, less gilded than the people of court I'd seen -- but maybe she was just different than her family. Maybe the language itself denoted royal birth, regardless of how the owner treated it, here, and I was but a strange outlier.

The idea cemented itself in my mind, and suddenly feeling like a fool for not seeing it sooner, I started to kneel, remembering how the soldier-prince had knocked my knees out from under me in front of his parents.

No, she shot back, before all else. Color warmed on her bronze cheeks, and her eyes ducked down from mine. *No, I am not. Get up. There are very few here who know your language -- the language of prophecy, the language of the book -- but we have all known that when you come, this is what you will speak.*

I remembered the prince, taking off his helmet and addressing his pallid father on his throne: *hair of fire. Dressed in gold. Magic in her veins.*

Is that what vatakina eligida means? Someone who speaks like me?

She blinked rapidly. *That is what they called you? Not the court or soldiers, but the prince himself?*

I... think. I said. There were a lot of them. That had said it.

She nodded and looked again to the sword. *It means "chosen one." Prophecy child.*

Oh, I said, as if the whole scene of earlier, the sword and tree and prince and magic had all been sheer happenstance, a huge cosmic joke that would soon be resolved. As if I hadn't woken up in a strange land and hadn't been able to find my way back.

As if, even then, I wanted to find my way back. *So you know English -- my language -- because you, too, are, chosen?*

No, she snapped again, just as defensive. *Those who know how you speak have learned it from a book, passed down among the kings from parent to child for a long time. And each time the book finds a new generation, another girl like me is taught, too, so that when you came, you would have a teacher and translator.*

I see, I said, and a friend?

She hesitated. *A friend, too.*

You've found it, called a voice from across the courtyard. In tandem, Rhia and I startled and whirled around as the prince strode across the lawn, palms raised defensively.

The prince grinned, and began to talk with Rhia in the other language -- Rhysean -- as he approached. He gestured not-very subtly towards me, and I very awkwardly tried to avoid making accidental eye contact with him even as I stared, until they seemed to finish whatever conversation they were having.

After a half-second pause, the prince picked back up in English. *Thank you, Rhia. I'll send --*

Ilyaas, Rhia supplied, before I could open my mouth, and I suddenly realized that despite having ridden with him for some hours, despite me having met his parents and called them *king* and the whole sword-from-the-tree thing, neither of us knew the other's name.

I'll send Ilyaas up to you after we finish talking. He smiled at her again, and she nodded and turned back towards the castle.

I tried not to seem nervous. I was very nervous, being this close to a cute dark-eyed prince who knew a lot more about the world around me than I did, who could be, if the day prior was any indication, very loud and scary when he wanted to be, so I

tried to quell my heart, which I feared was beating so loudly it would betray my fear straight-up.

I don't know your name, I blurted out, and then instantly regretted the way my tone came off, but either he was too polite to react to it or he genuinely hadn't noticed.

It's Cassius Rex, he replied. *But -- Cassian. Call me Cassian.*

Rex meaning King, I said, half to myself, and then repeated it, louder, upon his sideways glance. *Rex meaning King*, I clarified, definitely trying to sound like I hadn't just learned that from where it was engraved on my sword. I gestured, vaguely, to the circlet that sat on his head. *Very subtle. Aren't royals meant to have names taller than they are?*

He almost seemed taken aback at my half-jab. But it was true: every royal I'd read about had a string of titles that trailed after their first name like streamers. *Maybe where you come from*, he said. He crossed his arms and tossed his dark curls back from his face. The circlet atop his head glinted in the light. *But that is hardly necessary. Only the poor feel the need to find meaning in their names, and thus they trail on until something can be divined from it.*

Your name means king, I said. *That seems like meaning.*

That's fact, he said, tone hardening a decibel, *not a projection of a grand destiny never meant to come to fruition. I*

took the name Cassian when I turned twelve, but Rex has always been my family name. And then he stopped, and shook his head, the corner of his mouth quirking. I'm sorry. There's been a lot of discord lately with the name king, and I've jumped right into defending myself before you've even had chance to breathe.

What do you mean? I asked.

I realized I was much more a prince than a princess when I was twelve, he said, and became Cassuis Rex. Well -- Cassian. My friends call me Cassian.

That wasn't a problem for me, never was or would have been, but it didn't answer my question. No -- *with Rex. With king.*

What do you mean?

He took a breath, then paused. *It's a long explanation, and not one I'd like to do standing, if possible.* He gestured to the great tree behind us, with its copper-veined leaves waving gently in the breeze. *Care to sit?*

I did, and he sat down after me, maybe eight or nine inches between us. Tiny wildflowers peppered the ground around the base of the trunk -- blues and purples and whites nestled among the few exposed roots. Cassian caught my eye as I stared at these odd little flowers -- not quite the same as what I knew, but familiar in their defiance of monoculture, familiar in the way I'd gotten used to searching them out among the green of the grass. He grinned, again, crookedly -- just the corner of his

mouth quirking upwards as I skimmed my free hand over their tiny trumpets.

The gardener hates them, but I refuse to let him do a thing about them.

I looked up at him, then, and smiled back, because it felt awkward not to. This was a prince, and he was all the things a prince ought to be -- valiant and, yes, *handsome* in a golden-regal way, a lover of flowers, a protector of the small things that others forget. But this was also a boy who pulled me from a house where I didn't understand a thing and pushed me onto my knees in front of his father, and fear was stronger than any valiantly-hot vibes that he gave off.

What are they called? I asked, thankful for the space between us and the control in my voice.

He frowned. *I don't know the exact names for them, but they're... erm -- brave flowers? Tiny... brave flowers. In... your language?*

I chuckled, and then quickly tried to shut it off as a flush crept into his cheeks, but the redder he got, the harder it was to shut up.

I don't know what the word would be, he defended, *If it's not that.*

We call them wildflowers, I said, *I'm sorry for laughing.*

Wild-flowers, he repeated, softly and carefully, and I nodded.

And... here? I asked, nestling my sword into the grass and leaves and wildflowers beside me. *What do you call them In... here. In the language of... here.* I'd forgotten the word Rhia had used, besides it starting with an *R*.

Cassian pulled a tiny iris-colored wildflower from the ground and twirled it between his fingers. *Rhysean*, he said gently. *The language of here. Rhysean.*

Rhysean, I repeated, and promised myself that this time I would not forget. *And... wildflowers are called?*

Frets-Flors, he said, the word falling from his mouth like a friend.

Which is... brave flowers? I guessed.

The flush came back, just a tiny bit. *Yes. You could also call them... savastreflor.*

I tilted my head. *Which is?*

Untamed-flower. Unwanted-flower. He said.

Oh, I said, but it came out more like an *oof*.

Which is why I say frets-flors. Because they are brave, not unwanted.

Cassian passed the flower to me, and my heart did not change pace as his fingers brushed mine. He leaned back against the bark of the old tree. *But that isn't why we sat down,*

Ilyaas-from-somewhere. He looked back to me, smirking. *Is there more to that name? A grand projection of destiny?*

It's just Ilyaas, I said, but that wasn't true. I had a last name and an embarrassing string of middle names that my parents had seen fit to gift me, but Ilyaas was easier.

Just-Ilyaas, he said. *Ilyaas-from-somewhere.*

I laughed and thought about Georgia. *Ilyaas-from-nowhere.*

Ilyaas-from-beyond-here, he corrected.

I rolled my eyes. *Which you're certain of because --*

Cassian pulled one leg upwards towards his chest. *This is why we sat down. I'm going to tell you a story, Ilyaas-from-somewhere. It begins with a book filled with prophecy and ends someday soon, some leagues away from the city, with a group of rebels that would burn this world to the ground. It ends with you, and me, and a person yet-to-be found, but that's farther ahead already.*

Then how does it begin? I asked.

Long ago, he said, *my family was entrusted with a book filled with your language by a very powerful girl. We were told to keep the book safe, and to never forget what was inside. So -- each generation took on the knowledge, and held the book, and learned to speak like that ancient girl. She was from a Somewhere, too -- a beyond I believe must be the same as yours. It said much, but the most important piece was a story about a*

girl who would come from beyond, dressed in gold with hair like fire. This girl -- The Girl That Starts It All -- would find two others to make a soldier-poet-king, and the three of them would defeat the coming tyrant. The way to know -- beyond the coming that was predicted, was if she could wake the buried magic.

He caught a leaf on the wind, copper-gold-green, and nodded to my sword. *You did that. And thus, the prophecy has begun.*

So there are three? I asked, trying not to feel both overly self-important and soul-crushingly anxious at the idea that, one, I was not this child of prophecy but some poor stand-in and there was a big mistake that'd occurred, or, two, that I was, but that I'd somehow screw it up so colossally that the damage would be irrevocable. If there were three, that meant, at least, that there would be checks-and-balances, but I wasn't particularly good at fighting or singing or being a leader. All of my choices as prophecy child seemed to lead back to the first option: *that oh, god, I was going to screw this up.*

You, we think, Cassian said, are the soldier. Meant to change the world.

I thought back to what he said, so surely: *Rex meaning King? That's fact, not a grand projection of a destiny never meant to come to fruition.*

And you think you're the king. It wasn't said with any note of incredulity, but he stiffened all the same.

It fits with the prophecy. And the two are meant to find each other first -- and they're supposed to work closely together. There's a reason you were brought here, Ilyaas. You're meant to find the other two, and we know the tyrant has come -- the rebels, in the hills, laying cities low. It makes sense that the to-be-king would be as much a part of the prophecy as the Girl Who Starts It All.

I nodded. Yep, I was going to mess this up. *What else does it say?*

It says that all three are the same age. I was born seventeen summers ago, and... he hesitated. I could hear the apprehension in his voice, the possibility that everything he'd dreamt for himself could fall apart with my answer.

Twelve-o-three, *happy birthday, happy birthday to me.* But as far as I'd known then, I'd turned seventeen the day before.

Yesterday was my birthday, I said, *I'm seventeen, too.*

He breathed out, slowly, eyes half-closing. Relief. He tried to play it off, too -- *autumn child. It suits you.*

Thank you? I said, like Rose Red in The Camera Shop. An answer as A question. I cleared my throat. *So I'm the soldier? And you're the king. What about the poet?* The poet that he'd mentioned, our third. The last name that shouted to me from the sword: go and tear the city down, rex et poeta et soldat.

We will find them. It says we will find them. He sounded just as much as if he were trying to convince himself. *We have time. We're both here. The third will come.*

And then what? I asked.

We win.

That statement -- so bold, a proclamation and a plea at once -- hung in the air, given to the gods and who knows what else. Then Cassian stood, brushing off his pants and offering me a hand up. I took it without a thought, infinitely more comfortable with the boy-king that stood before me now, one as unsure of his future as I was mine, than the princeling who'd found me the day before.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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Back Again, Back Again: A Feast, a Festival, Part 1

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode five: A Feast, a Festival, part one.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I look back at my battle clothes at least four times a day. Once as I get up, to see if my other dreams have manifested-- or, if the armor was a dream-thing, finally faded. The second is right before I leave for school, because mundanities and function seem so much less entertaining than putting those clothes back on and laying on my floor and remembering. The third is upon my arrival home, a check to make sure nothing had happened to them, to make sure that the mediocrity of school hadn't killed this maybe-dream in my head. And the fourth -- if there's no extras scattered in, because I'm a creature of nostalgia and a weak sense of will -- is before I

go to bed. Because what if this is the night? What if, tonight, I fall asleep and wake up and find myself back in Rhysea, ready to greet my friends, ready to reap the bounty of the world I tried so hard to change?

I never put them back on, though, the bracers and shirt and pants and boots. It feels -- god, *wrong*, somehow, like if I do the last of the magic will leave them.

And then -- there's also the part of me that wonders that if I do -- if that would bring me back. If I went to sleep in my Rhysean clothes, if it would be the spark I was missing that's necessary to bring me *home*.

But I'm a coward. So I don't, because the one thing less terrifying than a dangerous little hope is finding out that it meant nothing at all. Because what if they mean nothing? What if I truly am stuck here forever?

What if -- what if there never was another place I got lost in, after all?

See, because I swallowed my fear and sent a picture of the clothes to my friend, a question attached: *do you remember these?* Because I -- I had to know if I was losing my mind, years worth of memories carved into my brain and nothing but an outfit to prove they ever really existed.

And... her response? *Oh, so you finally got around to distressing your rogue cosplay?*

But -- I don't -- I've never -- I've checked every camera roll. I always take pictures of my sewing projects as they come along, and there's nothing. The bracers are leather and engraved metal, lily-of-the-valley and peonies and girls casting out magic and wearing crooked crowns -- made in the style of the sword I'd bore. I don't know how to make something like that. I wouldn't even know where to begin.

And as I insisted this upon her, she seemed to think I was a bit silly for asking at all -- especially when the only explanation I could give for where else they'd have come from without sending my heart into a nervous stutter was an *I don't know*.

So -- did I dream the whole thing? I remember it, I swear -- clear as day. Do you know how in dreams, everything is slightly... off? Your glasses can't stay on your nose, no matter how many times you push them up. You spend a whole dream insisting you know a monologue, a dance, an event, but when it comes time for you to recite it you can't remember what it was any more than a first line, a first move. It seems vivid and real in your dreams, an impossibility meant to occur, but when you wake up, it fades into disillusionment, and there's only a second or two where you keep believing in whatever it is you dreamt. You wrack your brain for proof that it *did* exist, *does* exist, but you can't find anything and let it slip away.

When you're awake, you know it was a dream three breaths after you've woken up. This isn't the same. The more I wrack my brain, the clearer it all becomes, and I know -- I know -- it can't be a dream.

And yet -- doubt comes in, in cases like this.

Maybe I am crazy. Isn't that something your brain never wants to acknowledge? I can't focus on school -- I feel so much older than everyone sitting around me, crammed into a desk where I don't belong. Do I care what the hell president William Filmore did? Tell me something about him. Do it. Go. You can't -- you can't -- for all the title *president* gave him, he's a footnote in history. You memorize his name and move on.

I don't want everything I've seen to be like that. I don't want Callia and Leander and even godsforsaken Cassius Rex to be a footnote in my life. I don't want them to become a dream I've stopped believing in.

So I suppose I should keep telling you -- this -- *someone* what I'm feeling. And I'll hope it proves me right or wrong, some way or another.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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Back Again, Back Again: A Feast, A Festival, Part 2

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode six: A Feast, a Festival, part two.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: *There's to be a festival tonight, Rhia said, the day after Cassian told me about the prophecy.*

I was staring at a piece of parchment Cassian had left on my pillow after dinner the night before, along with a tiny bouquet of wildflowers from the tree, tied with a piece of twine. The paper had the prophecy written on it -- in Rhysean, line by line, with the English below it, like Rhysean No-Fear Shakespeare. *What for?* I asked, tracing over the neat letters with an absent finger.

Rhia looked to the parchment and frowned. *For you,* she replied, *because this means it's begun.*

Oh? Was my response, even though my chest did a nervous little ache at the words *for you*.

We spent the day getting ready. Rhia taught me pleasantries in Rhysean -- meaningless *hello's, how are you's. The weather is nice. It is: Sunny, rainy, cloudy, warm.* And less meaningless, too, meant to confirm, meant to reassure: *I am the Girl That Starts It. Lion Hair. Golden child. I'm from far away. My sword is from the tree. I am here to help the kings.*

A knock came at the door, as the day was growing long. A dress, wrapped in brown paper and tied with a sand-colored ribbon, was handed to Rhia and deposited in front of me, and we both held our breath as we unwrapped it.

For, god, it was gorgeous. The dress was a soft gold, elaborate beading falling along the bodice and down, down, until as we pulled it out it became clear it wasn't so much a dress as a jumpsuit, with wide legs mimicking a skirt -- but with added mobility -- and a wide deep-blue sash tied at the waist in a bow. The sleeves were made of a fine white cotton mesh, almost transparent, and woven along them were the flowers I was beginning to know so well -- lily-of-the-valley, peonies, that stretched along the sleeves and into the high neckline, made of the same fine mesh, fine embroidery.

Rhia grinned as I sat, flummoxed, open-mouthed and gaping. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever touched.

Do you like it? She asked finally.

God, yes. I managed. Gods, yes.

A thousand tiny buttons made up the back, and lacking incredibly dexterous fingers, Rhia helped me into it, my fingers fumbling the buttons as hers trailed behind, fixing my mistakes. As I turned, finally facing the mirror, my breath caught. I looked -- powerful.

I looked like I could change the world.

Where's yours? I finally said, half-joking, but her face fell for half a second before she caught herself and grinned again.

I'll be right here, when you get back. She said by way of response. *You're Cassian's responsibility tonight.*

Are you sure? I said, prying, even though we both knew this wasn't her decision to make. And her eyes told me as much --

even if she didn't use the words to say it -- *it's fine. Don't make trouble.*

A knock on the door again -- this time, less harried, more self-assured. Rhia ran over and pulled the door wide -- and Cassian stepped in.

For as much as he stared at me, those first five breaths of silence, I stared back -- for he cleaned up nicely, even if this was more *princeling* than the day before. His suit, the inverse of mine, was deep-blue with a soft golden trim, like the fashion of his parents the day I came, though this was more -- formal? And -- fit... to him, his power or charisma or -- regality -- making up the very fabric, the sort of aura YA books raved about. Another circlet -- this one slightly fancier than the, you know, casual daytime circlet of yesterday sat in his hair, the same gold as the accents on his suit.

You look like the Eligida, he finally said, hands held behind him.

You look like a king, I shot back, and he grinned crookedly.

Oh -- he stuttered, *speaking of* -- and from behind his back he pulled a crown of golden laurels, tiny white flowers laced in-between the branches. As he held it out, I stepped towards him. Cassian hesitated before setting it on my head, tilting it just slightly so it matched his.

There, he said. *Now you look like the Eligida*. One hand fluttered by my hair -- wild and red and free, no braids or pins pulling it back, and he grinned. *I'm glad you left it down.*

Thank you, I said, reaching my hand up and letting it brush over the crown, *for everything*.

He nodded to Rhia. *Thank you*, he said, then held out a hand to me. *Are you ready?*

No, I said, half-joking to try and quell my anxiety. Yes, I quickly corrected, seeing his frown and not wanting to have to explain my poor attempt at humor.

I could hear the noise of the gathered people before we even made it to the room. Music and laughter and all the things that made a party scene in a period piece sounded like they came from the other side of the door, and Cassian and I were the latecomers, him, sure and certain, me, with no idea who I was meant to be once I made it through. Did they want magic? I hadn't figured out how to do much beyond have my sword glow as I held it. The rest of it -- as much as I could feel it in my veins, in my blood -- was... inaccessible. Buried somewhere I didn't know how to access.

I hadn't even thought about being asked to do magic -- to perform -- until the moment we stood outside of the doors. I wanted to throw up.

Cassian raised his chin and squared his shoulders. I copied him, trying to seem like I was meant to take up space in the world.

The doors swung open, and side-by-side, we stormed in -- the leader and the Girl That Started It All.

The prince and the Vatakina Eligida.

The soldier and king, right out of the stories old.

No one announced us, like in period pieces, but the room swayed and stopped, three breaths held, as we stepped inside. I kept my chin raised high, and I took Cassian's hand when he offered it, grounding myself under the stares of a thousand people. And it was quite a gesture I'm sure, too -- us against the world.

He smiled, and nodded, and the people went back to their party. *Stay with me*, he said, not letting my hand go. *I don't want to have to do this without you.*

Funny, I murmured. I was thinking the same thing.

Conversation swirled around me in whirlpools I couldn't dream of understanding. Cassian ran translation, the two of us still linked together, as he conversed with the people around me and offered me lines of dialogue as I stumbled my way through the phrases I knew as I was introduced, over and over, to the people we met. Royals with hair stacked high or braided away or left free, in suits like mine or suits like Cassian's, in dresses and colors of every sort -- but -- gold. We were the only ones in gold.

Seanoc vatakina eligida. Tenoc gladius de Enarbol.
Gratinoc. Gratinoc. Gratinoc.

The world was impossibly complicated and I understood none of it. The people laughed at my incomprehension and smiled like I was a pet or looked to me like I was a god, some old forgotten legend come back at the moment of chaos for a *deus ex machina* ending. Cassian talked and didn't let go of my hand, kept me centered as the night wore on and I became more and more aware of the grinding in my blood as my sword sat upstairs and I was not with it. I found myself in front of the midnight queen and pale king and kneeled, this time, before someone could knock my knees out from under me, and the queen looked to Cassian and said, in English -- *she learns, then*. He shot her a look as she swept away, as she called over her shoulder in English that there would be more to learn than that.

The king, somewhere between sheepish and lazed, told me vaguely more of promises of training for battle and training for language, and as Cassian pulled me away as politely as he could, he promised that when the day came for us to pull the building tyrant down I would be ready.

I told him I'd never held a real sword before I came here. He told me that he would make sure I could.

The dark sky of the glass dome and the thousands and thousands of candles that scattered across the room gave everything an odd feverish glow that colored the room somewhere between orange and yellow. Dancers made their way to the floor and an odd sort of reel began as they spun off, Regency-style, into different arrangements to meet partners and retreat and start again. Cassian tried to take me with him, tugging me towards the floor, but I dug my feet in and begged him not to -- not knowing a single one of the dance steps that they performed -- so we danced, quietly, on the side of the room, a half-joking sway back and forth to pretend we were down there with the rest of them.

I realized how very, very bi I was. And that sometimes boys were made of starlight, too.

I said nothing of this to Cassian, but kept it as a thought, somewhere deep inside me, to unravel another day.

After enough convincing, he swapped crowns with me, and we went for another circle around the room: him now with flowers and me now a pretend-prince, us pretending not to notice the looks it garnered as Cassian made his whirlwind translations back and forth and I stumbled my way through my thanks and reassurances, *gratinoc, gratinoc, seanoc vatakina eligida*.

How do you describe an odd night, the conversation of which you can hardly remember? Sure, you remember the stares and the dancing, the crown-swapping and the bowing, but when the conversation around you means nothing, the judgments people draw over the teenage girl who's meant to save them get lost. The anxiety gets lost -- a lot of the emotion gets lost, becoming this haze of color and seven specific thoughts.

I remember the ache for my sword, though. Clear as anything. I remember Cassian walking me back to my room, so dark and late it was almost light -- gloaming, nine hours too late --

and I remember him leaning against the doorway as I faced him, inside, reluctantly swapping back the crown I'd managed to hold on to for most of the evening.

I remember his good-night. And I remember falling asleep with my sword, sheathed across my chest like a warrior entombed.

Rhia woke me up the next morning. There was a note from Cassain, slid under my door: *Enarbol courtyard. As soon as you're awake. Bring the sword.*

He was true to his word, as he tried to be in all things. *You'll learn how to carry that sword*, he'd said, and the time had come to begin.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

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Back Again, Back Again: Swords and Teachers

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode seven: swords and teachers.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: Cassian's sword was just as beautiful as my own, though in a vastly different way. Where mine was flowers and magic and prophecy, his was starlight and sharp edges of promise. Constellations and an etching of what half-looked like the sea ran along his blade, a story of gentle nights and a sky full of promise. *A you're not alone so long as there's sky so much as it was what strange constellations are found here, and how aloof they sit.*

He was, in fact, waiting for me in the clearing with the wildflowers and the Enarbol -- the great tree -- as his note had promised. He had dumped at the base of the tree enough assorted armor to fit half an army, and yet he sat, waiting, against the trunk, his sword balanced across his lap, his eyes closed to the morning air.

I couldn't help but stare. And as he cracked one eye open to see me wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the craftsmanship of his sword, he stood and offered it out to me, deftly swinging the blade around to offer it hilt-first.

I hesitated, reaching out my hand, not knowing if it held the same kind of curses as mine to keep others from touching it. Something that beautiful had to be forsaken to others.

Are all swords here like that? I asked, nodding to the blade he held. *Like mine?*

He held the blade out flat and tilted it back and forth as I had, some days earlier, so the engravings caught the light.

The ones with stories, he said. *The ancient ones. And --* he chuckled, lightly, at this, *the expensive ones.*

Is it a... I hadn't known how to finish that sentence. The fill-in I had been looking for ran vaguely along the lines of a *Rhysean thing*, but I wasn't sure whether or not that would actually clear anything up.

There's tradition in having one sword from your sixteenth onwards, he said, *and for it to be made for you, rather than a Someone Unknown, to be purchased at a later date. They say that a blade begins to hold memory, after a life long enough -- and as long as the original owner is --* he hesitated here -- *gone -- the weapon can be passed on for a new sixteenth.*

He shook his head. *It's nonsense -- what swords know, if they know anything -- it's not the point. The point is that when a sword is made, it's made with a story in mind. This is what was thought when the bellows said Cassius Rex.*

And then Cassian shifted his stance, raising the sword in both hands and putting one foot behind the other, like he was squaring up for a fight. Which -- he was. *Are you ready?* He asked, and I nodded, trying to mimic his stance. He walked around to my side and corrected my position with whisper-thin touches, bringing my hands slightly further towards my heart -- less like I was swinging a bat -- so my sword followed. *Is your weight centered?* He asked, and I adjusted, shifting back and forth until I was certain I was.

Good, he said, and I smiled. *This is your start. As long as you can find here, you'll be okay.* He took a few steps back, then mirrored me. In slow motion, he swung his sword out and to the right, so it came for my left side. I stepped, shifting my weight, and brought my sword to meet it.

Stay there, he asked, and once again came around to adjust my stance. We repeated in this way, him showing me basic attacks and defenses and us going back-and-forth in slow half-battle. Where even at this pace my mind still raced to try and make sure I was performing correctly, Cassian was relaxed, his sword an extension of him, flashing in his grip. He'd done this for years -- that much was obvious. And by the fact that he'd been riding with the soldiers that first day we'd seen each other, this was more than a formality to him -- he knew how to fight, and he'd used the training he'd had.

Again, he ordered, *but you attack me, this time.* So I did -- after a hesitation of several seconds, an overthinking that ended with my eyes fixed on the place I was aiming long before I started to move. The steps still felt unnatural to me, my grip rigid and odd, my movements clunky and unsure. He blocked me without a problem, pushing my sword away. *Faster*, Cassian suggested. *Do not stare so long at where you aim to hit.*

I tried again, even more pathetically. Cassian rolled his eyes and came at me, faster than before, and I brought my sword up as quickly as I could to meet his -- and overshot, my blade only catching the tip of his before the weight of his sword slammed into my arm.

I started to bleed. And curse. Cassian's eyes got really wide, and he began apologizing like nothing else, a line of *sorry sorry sorry* that tumbled between Rhysean and English. I tried to laugh so I didn't cry -- with minimal success -- and

hissed as he ripped a strip of linen from his shirt and wrapped it around my arm.

Sorry sorry sorry, he continued, *that wasn't my intention I am so sorry* as my fingers grazed over the cut, pain hissing through my teeth and out into the air.

I'm... gonna sit down, I mumbled, more than slightly teary at this point, and clunked down against the Enarbol, beside the pile of armor we'd forgotten about.

Cassian performed a long series of impressive swears as he came to the same conclusion I did. *Ilyaas --*

I laughed again and tried not to do that thing where you get bitter over things that're just as much your own fault as the other person's, because I'd forgotten, as well, too entranced by discussions of swords and beautiful things and becoming a Real Fighter, capitalized and emphasized, to think about practicalities like protective equipment. *It's fine. What sort of armor covers your forearm, anyways?* I asked, mostly joking.

Well -- he said, reluctance tinging the corners of his voice, and I stopped, turned to look at him.

Cassian? I prompted. *What sort of armor covers your forearms, anyways?*

This was how I learned about bracers. This was, coincidentally, also the only time I've smacked a prince.

I think we should stop here, for now, he said after some minutes, kind of testing the water. I combo grimace-sheepish-nodded, partially because I knew I was making a big fuss over getting injured while playing with swords, partially because I agreed. After sitting for long enough, exhaustion was starting to creep into my limbs, an aftereffect of battle and training, unfamiliar to me.

He found me armor, temporary leather stuff from past girls who'd trained at the castle, with the promise of my own coming soon. Another apology -- and a third, and a fourth, left his lips as we went back inside and he dropped me back at my room, and another came, a mouthed *sorry* as we dined with the kings come evening and his mother asked me what had happened to my arm, now properly wrapped by Rhia -- though she'd done it with quite a bit of eye-rolling and a few comments to be more careful. It was my first time seeing that side of Rhia -- the friend I'd come to know, stepping outside the role she was taught to play as *mestrana de eligida*, teacher of -- me.

The next several weeks were spent much the same way. Cassian woke me up early -- a knock on my door just past dawn and he was gone, running down to the courtyard as he waited for Rhia and I to wake up. The mornings were spent training -- learning how to handle a sword, learning to find comfort in the steps rather than hesitation and stiffness. I could never beat Cassian -- I still gave myself away as I moved, left myself vulnerable and open more times than not. I didn't know how to fix my weak spots before someone else spotted them, and though I ended up with many more bruises, a winning combination of armor and slowly developing reflexes stopped me from embarrassing myself with tears again.

Cassian stuck around, one morning, after his dawn-knock on our door, and I yelped as I pulled it open, not having expected to see a prince sat against the wall. He scrambled to his feet and picked up a box that sat to the other side of him -- and, looking rather proud, stepped inside and laid it on my bed.

He hesitated. *You should open it*, he said, and Rhia, who'd snapped herself into complacency in the presence of a king, joined me at my bed as I undid the twine and pulled the lid off the box.

It was a set of armor -- leather and metal pulled neatly together into something beautiful. And across the top -- at this Cassian tried to look not nearly as impressed with himself as I'm sure he felt -- were a pair of bracers. They were leather, with a plate of silver-y metal the same color as my sword covering the side that didn't lace together. The metal was etched in peonies and lily-of-the-valley, and in the center of each one were similar figures to that on my sword. One suggested a girl, casting out for magic, and the other showed a king, her chin lifted and a crown set on her brow.

I didn't know what to say -- *thank you* seemed so inadequate, but I tried it anyways, and then again, in Rhysean, because they were so clearly a thing of here-beauty that trying to make up for them in English words was wrong. *Gratinoc*. *Gratinoc*, *Cassius Rex*, *gratinoc*. Thank you. Thank you thank you thank you.

He stepped closer, leaning against the headrest of my bed. *I'm afraid these don't come without cost. There's a rebel group in a town, no more than a half a day away -- from what we have been told, they plan to raze it. We leave in the morning. The kings want you to come with me to take care of them.*

I won't lie: fear twisted my stomach. The cut he'd given me had healed in the weeks that had passed, but I was of no hurry to acquire more injuries, and -- what's more -- I was of no hurry to hurt people, either. I wasn't even sure that I could, if my skills were put to the test against anyone who'd held a sword for at least as long as I had.

I was scared of leaving the castle. Of facing the possibility of death, of the thought that others would look to me like they had at the festival night: like they had a vision of me I could never match.

But I didn't say any of this aloud, because Cassian was just as much someone who expected something from me that I didn't quite understand.

Of course, is what I responded with, looking to Rhia for comfort, looking to the girls on my new armor for reason. As I tried to convince myself that I would be fine.

He nodded. I didn't know if it was relief or the same apprehension I felt that colored his features. *I'll let them know. Thank you, Ilyaas.*

I nodded in return, walking with him to the door, and tried not to feel as though I were making a horrible mistake.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

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Back Again, Back Again: Teeth and Claws

Trigger Warning: This episode contains descriptions of violence, blood, and background character deaths.

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode eight: teeth and claws.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: That day's dawn didn't come with a knock on my door and a call to training, Cassian's promise of learning more than I had the day before. Rhia and I slept past sunrise -- until nearly midday -- and I instead found myself, half-awake, squinting into the golden glow of sunlight through the curtains, as Rhia sat, cross-legged, at our desk, humming, transfixed on her embroidery. There was fifteen seconds of total peace -- of brain fog and her haunting lover's song and the golden warmth of the sun on my face -- before I remembered the day and what it held.

I didn't stay in bed long. Instead, I began to prepare for battle.

Cassian waited outside my door again, and I stepped out, leggings and shirt, my box of armor under one arm, my stomach roiling with malicious intent. Nervous energy pulled his stride longer than mine as we walked, where he was usually so careful

to match his pace to the person he was walking with. He fiddled with the straps of his armor, his sword at his waist -- his armor was already on, of course, that was Cassian: always prepared, his form of defense against his anxieties.

We found ourselves in the arena -- a place we didn't frequent together for the noise and the sheer amount of soldiers that were housed and trained around it. The floor was sandy and the walls were tall on three sides -- the fourth opening to a gate, where woods raged on the other side. Sound echoed through the place, horses and soldiers amplifying their noise so much that a company became an army. It was chaos -- these thirty-something soldiers Cassian had selected, all far removed from me, all looking to the two of us in the entryway, waiting for time to start, for an order to be given. This was why the *Enarbol* was preferable. We were alone at the *Enarbol*, just Cassian and the tree and I. No one could see how incompetent their eligida was by the *Enarbol*.

I put on my armor -- laced on my bracers, put on my breastplate and shoulder guards and heavy leather boots, -- and watched as, from a pocket, Cassian pulled a tiny jar of golden paint.

He dipped two fingers into it, motioning to me. *So they know*, he murmured, and smiled crookedly. *So when you ride they see the magic on your face and know the day has come.*

I felt my stomach churn, because he and I both knew my magic was unreachable. For as much as I felt it in my blood, there was no way I could pull it out and into my hands beyond a faint glow in my sword -- Cassian was convinced I would find my way when I needed it. I was much less certain.

But I let him streak the paint on my face, a battle cry in itself, and then I matched it on him -- two fingers into the jar, two lines down his left cheek and across the right side of

his forehead -- *now we match*, I told him, screwing the lid back onto the jar, and he grinned.

A soldier and a king.

A soldier and a king, I repeated, and went to pull my hair back.

Leave it down, he said, grabbing my hand with the leather band still clutched in it. My face flushed -- I'll admit it, because this was so different than the game of painting another's face. *Let them know who you are*. He took the strap and tied it around his wrist, tucking it underneath his bracers.

I shook off the burning in my ears and pretended I hadn't noticed at all. *Go greet your soldiers, king*.

You first, he said, and changed from the boy I knew into the princeling-warrior. *Ready?* He said. *Your first battle*.

I was not ready. I had magic in my veins and a sword at my side that told me I was the child of a prophecy, but I did not want to kill anyone and was pretty sure they would kill me before I could ever get the chance. If I was dead, I didn't know if that meant the magic would fall back asleep or this would be some Whoever Picks Up The Sword Continues The Line shit, but I didn't see it going very well.

I nodded, fake-saluted in a way that made him drop his airs just for a moment to laugh. *As ready as I can be, king*.

He went to greet his soldiers. I hung back, along the wall where we'd stood, as his voice boomed and they gathered around him, as the plans for attack rang out in Rhysean and the soldiers responded with excitement and trust and nervous energy -- but surety. They knew their path, and they were not afraid of where it led.

Cassian turned, then, and swept one hand out to me. Thirty pairs of eyes locked onto me, and his words were lost underneath the weight of their stares. But I knew the message: *this is the*

Vatakina Elegida. She stands with us, and thus we will bring this tyrant low.

We rode out. My horse didn't like me much, I could tell, and the fact that I had little idea of how to ride one only made our tentative connection more fragile. I rode beside Cassian all the same, our company behind us, silent but for the fall of hooves and sounds of the road. We took a path through the woods and soon found ourselves at the village where the resident soldiers had sent for us. The people had heard us coming -- or had been made aware of our coming -- and were out, lining the roads, as we marched in.

The villagers had a similar reaction to the woman who gave me her coat, the first day I arrived -- they couldn't seem to believe I was real. Cassian and I dismounted and talked with the old woman and her wife who helped run the village, who blanched -- I had assumed in fear -- when we told them we'd gotten word of the rebel group nearby. I say we. Cassian did all of the talking, as neither of them knew my English, and I didn't know a helpful amount of their Rhysean. I'd learned, at this point, the words for *rebel* and *sword* and whatever else Cassian had thought would be useful to me today, but the rest of their conversation -- I hadn't a clue.

They exchanged a look -- the sort of thing that comes after a lifetime of loving each other -- and the old woman's wife pointed us west -- just past the village, which sat at the corner of the Vast Wood and the small cities surrounding it.

Cassian relayed this information to his soldiers, and ordered their dismount -- horses are a liability in the thick parts of the wood, too much risk for the high ground they give. It was as he did this that the old woman grabbed my free hand -- the one not wrapped in my reluctant horse's reins -- and whispered in Rhysean that I held onto in my head -- that I

remembered for years until I knew what it meant, for the way she said it made my throat catch --

Vatakina Eligida, prosperanil traem.

Translated for intention, it means *prophecy child, aim true*.

I froze, there, this one hand gripped in a woman's who suddenly seemed a lot less strange to me, and my hand began to glow the green-gold of magic. She gasped, the slightest inhale of breath, as if she, too, could feel the way the world sharpened around us -- then quieted, suddenly, a bit more in tune than before.

As we stared at each other, I realized gold now flickered in her midnight eyes.

And then, as she took her hand from mine, her hand glowed, just the slightest bit, in green-gold, and it was my turn to suck in a breath.

She had -- magic.

Gratinoc, she whispered, the idea of the word, and -- somehow it all made sense. Whatever dregs of magic had lived in her all these years -- somehow -- I'd woken them up with a touch.

She made the sign the woman had made, on the first day I came -- the one that means a lot of things. *Shoulder-shoulder-out*, fingers crossed like a broken promise. I startled, at the time, more trying to recall where I'd seen it before than shocked at her action, but I lifted my own fist to my chest and made the gesture back at her.

She smiled and melted back into the crowd just as Cassian reappeared at my side.

Are you alright? He asked me, for I was open-mouthed and gaping like a fool.

Seeing him, my wonder fled and I was starkly reminded of the battle ahead.

At my lack of preparation and high probability of death. Yeah, I said, shoveling fear back down my throat. And then -- *I think I just gave magic away.*

His eyes snapped to mine, panic lighting them for just a minute. You -- *what?*

Not all of it, I hastily corrected, *just -- a little. And I feel -- better. Now.*

To whom? He asked, but I couldn't see the old woman any longer in the crowd, so I shrugged. *Don't do it again,* he snapped, then caught himself as I flinched. He apologized and corrected himself. *Not until we know what it means.*

I think I know what it means, I wanted to say, but kept my mouth shut as Cassian called a command and the soldiers stepped forward, us along with them, as we took the final part of our march west. I wrapped my horse's reins tighter around my knuckles.

We reached the woods. They were deathly silent, the town behind us having faded to the vaguest idea of what-was, and the trees rustling overhead only emphasized the stillness.

But there was force to it. There's weight to the minutes before violence, a tugging at your heart and head that tells you *something's coming. Something's coming.*

We left our horses at the edge of the clearing and, at Cassian's signal, drew our swords.

Something's coming. Something's coming, tugging at the not-right silence. I tried to keep my breathing quiet, tried to keep it a steady in-out as I realized more and more by the second how woefully underprepared I was.

How do you describe a battle? There was silence, and then suddenly there wasn't; rebels dropped down from the trees and

came out from their hiding spots and met Cassian's soldiers and Cassian and I -- I was supposed to stay by his side, to make I didn't die, to make sure I didn't get hurt -- but in the surging of people and the rush of *bloodshed* I found myself alone from him, my eyes darting wildly about as I tried to find the center I'd had drilled into me .

A girl my age, brown-haired and pale-skinned, met me, her sword flashing out and rage in her eyes. She knew who I was, what my hair meant, what the sword I carried said. I barely managed to block her first strike, the force of it nearly jolting the blade from my hands, and the second one, aimed at my face, wasn't caught in time before it cut open my cheek as I flailed wildly back.

I couldn't tell you what all I was thinking. Probably *holy shit I'm going to die*. Probably *find your center, find center, you'll be okay if you find center*.

I did not find center in time, and the pommel of the girl's sword smashed into my side. I staggered, briefly, and dropped like a log -- following which she raised her sword up and drove it deep into my shoulder.

I screamed.

Things you can guess about being stabbed: it hurts.

Things you don't think about, before being stabbed: You can feel your skin popping under the pressure and then your muscle tearing, and the blinding-hot pain doesn't stop you from feeling it as it draws back out, either, and that part's worse, because now all the pain receptors in your arm are alive.

The pain -- between the pounding of my head and my shoulder, screaming -- and my screaming, probably, too -- I did not get stabbed with grace like a movie hero, I cried about it like a baby and did not get back up -- the pain made the next parts blurry. I remember her snarling something in Rhysean, but

I couldn't even guess at what it was. I remember her raising up her sword again, and the thought, sudden and frightening in my mind, that this was where I would die, before Cassian was there and slammed into the girl, the two of them stumbling away and beginning to trade blows, swords matching, both of them moving with a speed that I hadn't thought possible.

I screamed again, I think, because this was the most pain I'd ever been in, my blood burning as it left -- and the sword called out to it, and magic thrummed in me, so sudden and fierce. I remember lifting my other hand, now coated in my own blood, towards the girl and --

She disappeared. Just -- *popped* right out of existence, what once was now no more.

I still don't know where she went. I hope somewhere safe. I tried to bring her back, but I wasn't sure how to do that. I never figured out how to send anything else away -- I tried with a bunch of objects, with a mouse once too. I don't know if it was the pain or the battle or the fact that Cassian was trying to kill her and I still did not want that to happen that made her wink out existence but... there she went.

Cassian had been raising his sword to block her blow, braced for a wound that never came, and he looked to me then, awe and fear and wonder staining his face before he met the next rebel in front of him, two swings before he put his sword through the man's chest.

That was the first time I watched someone die. It was not the last.

The battle didn't last much longer than that. Soon the rebels were all dead or gone and I was still unsuccessfully trying not to cry as Cassian raised his sword and his soldiers cheered and I was still trying not to curse as Cassian helped me up and one of the soldiers turned to him and asked *what should*

we do with all of this, his Rhysean slow enough that I understood.

Burn it, came Cassian's response.

The bodies, too?

His face hardened. *Them along with the rest.*

I sat to the side as they pulled their own dead from the lot and stacked the bodies just outside the edge of the wood, in the clearing between the village and the place blood had been shed. Even I could see the message in it, hard and unshakeable, for those in the village, for all those the story would reach: *this is what happens to those who defy kings.*

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

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Back Again, Back Again: Teeth and Claws, Part Two

Trigger Warning: This episode contains descriptions of violence, background character deaths, gore, and descriptions of self harm.

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode nine: Teeth and Claws, part two.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I sat to the side as they pulled their own dead from the lot and stacked the bodies just outside the edge of the wood, in the clearing between the village and the place blood had been shed. Even I could see the message in it, hard and unshakeable, for those in the village, for all those the story would reach: *this is what happens to those who defy kings*. Wood was dragged out and the pyre lit; it wasn't long before the smell of cracking leather and burning flesh mixed with woodsmoke. The story was easy enough to see form.

Cassian came and sat beside me shortly after, done dragging bodies with the rest of the uninjured soldiers. He pushed a dagger into my lap -- it was roughly hewn, the wood that made the handle was worn smooth from time rather than polishing. *All that's left of the girl you -- disappeared*, he said, and I grimaced.

Isn't it kind of gruesome to take a trophy? She would've killed me.

But you killed her, Cassian retorted, and as I flinched, he corrected, or -- disappeared her. So you win. He nodded again to the dagger. It's so you don't forget. He pointed to my shoulder. We'll have someone in the village set that before we ride out. His fingers brushed over the cut on my face. I tried not to flinch at that, too, when other areas -- now wrapped, to slow the bleeding, but not cleaned or stitched or any else -- were worse.

I'm sorry, he said, quietly. You shouldn't have come.

I didn't respond. I still don't know what I would have said.

Cassian sought out the healers in the village -- of which there were two, a mother and her son, a few years younger than us -- and the two of them set to the hurt soldiers. When it was my turn, the boy gasped -- his mother shushed him before they set to work, cleaning the wound with -- honey, of all things -- before the boy put my arm back together with short, tight stitches that I tried not to flinch at.

Gratinoc, I told them as they finished, not knowing much else, and the boy said something that caused his mother to smack the back of his head -- but at my blank stare, he sighed and turned away, wrapping their supplies back up into cloths as they moved to the next soldier.

We rode back, exhaustion rather than excitement in the air. For the eighteen rebel bodies that had been burned we'd lost six soldiers -- of which I couldn't help but mourn, though I felt false in doing so -- I hadn't known their names, and there were true friends of them that had more right to shed tears than I did. We took the long way through the city up to the castle -- through snaking village after village, banners high,

bloodstained but victorious -- and the people watched, stone-faced. Just as before, the message was clear, what our ride meant, what our victory said: *this is what happens when you stand against a king.*

We passed through the gates, back to the castle once more, just as the sky began to darken. The queen and king, alerted earlier of our arrival home by a messenger Cassian sent ahead, stood on the platformed entryway, most of the castle's staff surrounding the road in -- at the end of which, they waited, dressed in splendor and midnight blue and gold. Cassian dismounted and they greeted their son, the queen pulling him into a hug. The words were clear on his lips, even as I hung back with the rest of the soldiers. *It is done.*

The queen gestured to me, and Cassian nodded, so I pulled myself from my horse, wincing as the stitches rubbed on my shoulder. I was disheveled and bloody -- even more so than Cassian -- and the queen noticed this, her eyes narrowing but her actions not changing as she motioned me up towards them. I climbed up the steps and, hesitantly, kneeled before them, afraid of making the wrong choice.

Cassian helped me to my feet. I turned, then, looking out to face the crowd.

Raise your sword, child, the queen breathed, the words sharp in her mouth.

My arm -- I mumbled, but the words came again, sharper.

Your sword.

So I pulled my sword from my belt and winced, trying not to cry as I lifted it above my head and my stitches snagged and my body screamed but as she'd wanted, as it always did, my sword began to glow, a faint gold-green that poured out from it.

This was what the crowd had wanted to see. And the reaction was palpable, a shifting in the way they stood and moved.

The queen began to speak as I lowered it and pushed it back into its sheath once more, and, my eyes blurry with tears because *shit shit that had hurt more than I'd expected*. I felt Cassian grab my hand. He squeezed, gently, once, twice, a reminder, *I'm here. I'm sorry*, as the queen went on in Rhysean and we tried to look like children of prophecy rather than just... children.

The procession disbanded. Cassian and I were in the arena, and then I was in my room, Rhia helping me peel off my clothes, her hands shaking, nervous by the amount of blood, as she took in my stitches and my decimated shoulder with a breathy *oh, Ilyaas*, the words so full of sorrow that I lost it again -- and I was crying, even though it didn't hurt nearly as bad now, but because here she was, and she cared, and sometimes tears come more easily when someone else talks about it.

She pulled me into a hug, and we collapsed onto the bed, me shaking over the people that had died, that I had almost been one of them, that I disappeared a girl to who knows where --

That I wasn't ready, that I had let everyone down, that if Cassian hadn't stopped her I would've been dead -- that I was useless in battle, for someone that was supposed to be a soldier. For someone who was prophesied to be a soldier.

Rhia held me, still, stroking my hair, and murmured, *maybe you were meant to be a king*.

I cried more. She cried too, a little bit, and laughed when I saw her tears as she said she was crying because I'd cried too much to not have to balance it out.

She put me into a bath and let me sit until the water had gone cold, even though the kings had wanted Cassian and I at dinner, then helped me into the same shirt I'd worn the first day -- the white one, that looked like Midas had touched the sleeves -- and a pair of leggings and boots. She smiled at me,

and cupped my chin in one hand, and I was filled with the worst mix of shame that you get after crying in front of someone and a love that fills you, fierce and hot, after they protect your very soul.

I pressed my forehead to hers and squeezed my eyes shut. *gratinoc*, I whispered, and *of course* fell from her lips, quiet and forgiving.

I didn't want to go downstairs to dinner. I wanted to stay with Rhia.

I sat at the high table across from Cassian, the kings at either end. I was late -- significantly -- they were well into the main course of the meal, but I bowed and didn't take any other action to excuse myself, pulling myself into my chair and looking down at the food in front of me.

Tension sat, dark and thick, among the people at the table. It wasn't long before Cassian and his mother began trading terse words in Rhysean, deliberately difficult and fast to make it impossible for me to understand. I blocked them out -- it wasn't the first time -- before Cassian set his fork down with a little too much force and said, tersely, in English -- *you shouldn't have made her come*.

The queen replied in Rhysean, her eyes suggesting murder if Cassian didn't can it.

He didn't. *She almost died*, he snapped, *because you insisted she go*.

She's the prophecy child, the queen said, in English, now, her words plucked with emotionless airs. *She should be able to do more*.

Silence.

I don't think I'm hungry anymore, Cassian said, standing. The queen snapped something, in Rhysean again, her words no longer meant for my ears.

Cassian sat back down.

The rest of dinner was in silence.

This was when I started to get that Bad Feeling in my gut. I don't mean they're-evil vibes, just that -- things weren't going to stay the same. They didn't. More on that later.

And -- that was two months in. And -- I've been back two months now. I go to sleep before midnight every day, just in case the clock'll change to a new day and I'll find myself back in Rhysea, but I haven't. I suspect I won't.

(Silence)

I shouldn't say that. Words have power. Intentions have power. I need to believe that I'll get home --

(Silence.)

I can't believe that I'm going to be stuck here forever.

(Silence.)

Back there...? I talked at some point about -- how could I tell if I was dreaming or if Rhysea and Cassian and Rhia were real? But... there... I had the same thoughts, at least for a few days. How did I know this was real? That it wasn't a long dream I was having. I said that a lot to myself, in the beginning. *I'm dreaming*. Even though the rain had felt real. *I'm dreaming*. *I'm dreaming*. But sfter a few days, where I would sleep and have different dreams and wake up and have them slide off like jell-o from a hot car, forgetting everything that I'd dreamt but this new world staying real -- I believed it. Believed *in* it. I couldn't've imagined magic that vivid. The feeling it puts in your head --

It... *hurts*, to miss it.

(Silence.)

And then, of course, getting stabbed. I'm not clever enough to dream up pain like that.

I... I even double-checked, day eight of being back. I had to know if I'd dreamed up that pain. And I mean, we have plenty of knives in the kitchen for cutting and paring and --

It's the same pain. It hurts the same way.

It wasn't a dream.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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Back Again, Back Again: Longings

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode ten: longings.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: Here's something Peter, Edmund, Susan, and Lucy never tell you at the end of Narnia: Spending your life in another land, growing old and gaining muscle and scars and a body foreign from that of your childhood and then reverting back to a form you once were more than sucks.

I suppose it could be worse. Lucy was eight.

Eight. Can you imagine that? Eight years old and you spend your entire life in Narnia -- you get a period and become a woman and deal with growing pains and teenage hormones and growing old, seeing gray hair and coming into your knowledge -- and then a stag tricks you through a wardrobe and you're still forty-eight or whatever the hell in your mind but now you're four feet tall again and no one would ever think about taking you seriously.

Lucy got a trip to Narnia -- she got two lives -- but she got *fucked*, and no one wants to talk about it.

I've spent a lot of hours scrolling through tumblr theories about Narnia, about how Edmund must've missed his old life where he was a king and how Susan chose to forget, to pretend it all a

childhood make-believe because that was easier than confronting everything she'd lost.

How did they not become bitter, at this place that spit them back out? That used them for everything and then took it all away? How did they go back so willingly, knowing it would be ripped from them again?

I suppose it's because they missed the magic. I suppose it's because it hurt them to be away from it all.

(Silence.)

Every time I look in the mirror I'm shocked. It's not just that I'm younger, but -- I'm softer. Places that used to be ribs and muscle and scars aren't anything at all. We were in theatre class and I was helping move set pieces and I forgot how much I'd lost -- for a moment, all I could feel was shock as the column didn't shift.

It's just -- I just -- feel -- cheated?

But you don't care about that. Of course I do -- but you don't want to hear me complain.

Where was I?

The raid. I'd gotten stabbed. We made it back to the castle and I scrubbed off the gold paint and the next morning they checked my shoulder, the physician asking me if I'd put the salve on the wound that he'd sent to Rhia. I said yes, and asked him to be careful, but as he unwrapped the bandages we found the cut looking like it had happened months ago. The physician looked shocked. *Magic?* He'd said, but it had sounded more like a question. *Is it magic?*

I don't know, I'd responded, even though I'd guessed it was. My wound with Cassian hadn't healed even close to this quickly, but I hadn't disappeared someone right afterwards -- hadn't tapped into that power so it could help me in return. *Maybe it's the salve?* I asked hesitantly.

It wasn't. It was the magic.

He pronounced me capable of fighting again, so I was right back into the training of the last few weeks. Cassian and I ran laps until I dry-heaved into the bushes. He made fun of my swordplay even though, hell-o, I'd *gotten stabbed* the day before. Rhia spent hours teaching me letters and words in Rhysean, as the afternoon stretched into the evening. It wasn't until I came down for dinner and found the other three all seated before me -- not unusual -- with matching expressions -- unusual -- that the change I'd felt in the air the night before came into being.

The queen stared at me from her end of the table. I hadn't even been late -- the other three just seemed to be early, wanting to have discussed something before I made my appearance. She dragged the tines of her fork across her plate, a studied air of noncommitment surrounding the way she moved.

Cassian told a different story. He was on edge -- just enough to make me nervous. He glanced at his mother the king, several times, before she finally opened her mouth to speak.

You've proven to be a liability on the field of battle, she said, her words clipped and formal. She didn't look at me as she talked, still drawing the tines of her fork through the dressing on her plate, but the English alone -- much less the context -- was enough to let me know this statement was addressed to me.

I swallowed and tried not to feel shamed -- even though it had barely been a month, even though I hadn't seen her raise a sword once. *I know, king. I'm sorry.*

You are meant to be the soldier.

Cassian shot me a look -- pleading, apologetic. This was not the first time his mother had discussed her displeasure in me. This was not the first time that I had wanted to say something snarky in return -- which I always did, exaggeratedly,

to Cassian long after the conversation had ended and I'd been docile to the queen, tame and malleable.

I know, king. I'm sorry.

How do you spend your days? She asked, noncommittally, and Cassian opened his mouth to respond. She silenced him with half a stare, ice-cold, and continued dragging her fork along her plate. *I asked the Eligida.*

That was another thing. She had never used my name -- it was always *Eligida* or, if with Cassian's name in the conversation, too, *soldat* -- soldier.

Well, Eligida?

Training with your son, King. And learning letters with Rhia -- with the Menstrana de Eligida.

She said something, low and sharp, in Rhysean. Cassian muttered a response, the sort of harried *I know* I'd heard fall from his lips so many times before. She repeated it, louder, in English. *She should be doing more.*

Yes, mother, Cassian said. And then, with a look that told me the English was for my sake, he continued: *but if you put her into court with all the rest, she'll never learn to fight --*

-- She would make appearances, which would make her good for something, the queen snapped. She fixed her gaze on me.

We believe, she said, nodding to the king on the other end of the table -- who nodded, hastily, having zoned out of the conversation some time before -- *that you should make a bigger show of your place here. Though my son disagrees,* she said, casting her stare to Cassian.

I -- I don't believe I quite understand, king, I hedged, for Cassian had bounced the word *court* around as if it was meant to give me clarity, but I hardly ever knew, with these kings.

My son insists you cannot fight, she cut in, and Cassian winced at her wording. *So if you're not to go out to show the*

people what we own, then you shouldn't spend your days locked in a room with a tutor or behind the Enarbol with my son.

She fixed Cassian with a look. We have an arena. Your soldiers wait for you, there.

Let me fit that in, he snapped, exasperated, among training the Eligida and learning to run a country --

The queen released a long string of venomous words in Rhysean. Cassian apologized, quietly, his lip curling just enough to let me know I wouldn't be the only one ranting about the queen later.

Come to court, she said to me. My son can have you for the mornings -- in the arena, not hidden in the garden -- and you will join us in the afternoons. It will do you as much good to learn language there as in a dusty room.

There was no please in her sentence, no if you'd like. So I said yes, king, because that was all there was to say.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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Back Again, Back Again: Longings, Part Two

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode eleven: Longings.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I made a fool of myself the next morning, Cassian and I sparring in the arena among the soldiers drilling. I was woefully out of shape, compared to Cassian, compared to the hundreds of soldiers that trained in rotation around us, and every time my sword clattered from my hands and onto the sand of the arena, someone was always watching. My focus only got worse as the morning wore on, and as much as Cassian tried to be patient, there was only so much he could take, too -- being back in the arena had only sparked the anger of last night, his frustration with the queen.

He ended up sending me to run drills with the soldiers as he fought, full out, sword flashing at speeds I could only dream of moving, with line after line of soldiers until there was a clump, standing off to the side, of people he'd beaten.

I embarrassed myself running drills -- I was slower than most everyone else, and ten minutes of running left me breathing hard while everyone else circled by without problem. I'd wanted to make a comment about having already ran that morning with Cassian, to try and save what little face I had left, but I

didn't know the words -- nor would I have had the guts to say them, to this room full of people who could drop-kick me across the sand if the urge so struck them.

There was a growing list of people that could say they'd beaten the Eligida in a sword fight by the end of the morning.

And that wasn't even where my day hit peak disaster.

I bathed. Rhia laced me into a pretty dress, gold-and-blue, with a corset -- which, god, I hadn't worn before and -- while not half as bad as that Elizabeth-Swann-fainting-scene in *Pirates of the Caribbean* makes it out to be, it pushed uncomfortably on the myriad of bruises I'd acquired earlier that day. My ribs already hurt. That was not the time to be adding a corset into the mix.

But the queen had sent the dress, and when a queen sends you a dress, the only thing to do is answer with *yes, king*, and put it on.

Cassian knocked on my door, his face just as distastefully set as I'm sure mine was at the thought of spending an afternoon making a fool out of myself in front of the entire court -- the last time I'd seen them, all together, was when I was sopping wet in a Hobbit shirt. There was something deeply anxiety-inducing about having to face them after that -- especially as I'd topped the occasion off by swooning like a fainting goat. And while there was part of me that did a little happy dance at the thought of *going to court* like in all the novels I'd read, the fact that Cassian was pissed told me that it was probably going to be less fun than I'd fantasized.

Cassian leaned against the doorway and pulled a crown out from behind his back -- it was made of thin gold spindles and wire flowers, climbing around each other like vines. Pieces of raw quartz, long and thin, were set into it like sunbeams.

Since you liked the last one so much, he explained, and set it on my head. I grinned at him, feeling more than a little empowered by a talisman, however silly that may have been, and thanked him in English and my best Rhysean. I reached up to tilt it just slightly, like his.

Now we match, I said, our formal outfits once more direct opposites of each other -- gold and blue, blue and gold. I made a face. But my crown is better.

That's because I chose it, he joked. My taste is far superior.

Clearly. I looked down at my dress. Your mother sent this. It's only bruising my ribs more. Not that that's saying much, after this morning.

They have been gloating quite a lot, Cassian chuckled. About how easy it was to beat the Eligida in battle.

I snorted and rolled my eyes, shoving down the twinge of guilt that pierced my chest at not being better. At -- this. At -- being a soldier, being a hope. Before I could dwell too long, I raised my gaze back to his, lifting one hand to the crown. Thank you, I repeated, softly. For -- everything. I -- god, I wish I had money or something. Some way to get you a gift back.

He smiled, his tongue poking through his teeth. Then tell me about where you came from, tonight. Stories of whatever you loved most from there. That's payment more than enough. He straightened and shook the sentiment from his voice. Now -- we don't want to be late.

Oh, god, what a horror that would be, I joked, and let him pull me out the door, calling a good-bye to Rhia as we went.

All were gathered by the time we arrived -- the queen's orders to be fashionably late, to make a show, to arrive together, the soldier and the king. Cassian and I looped around from the outside to walk in through the main doors -- the ones

I'd come through last time, with the lions on the heavy doors and golden splendor through the hall. *Chin up*, he had told me, first in Rhysean and more haltingly in English. *Strength. Don't be afraid. They will be able to tell.*

Panic: *do I kneel?* I asked, and he frowned, without a chance to respond before the doors swung open.

Cassian raised his chin: princeling, not friend. I raised mine beside him, and as much as I was freaking out over what I would do once I reached the end of the hall, it didn't stop me from taking my first stuttering steps, or matching Cassian's pace as much as he matched mine as we stormed down the aisle.

I kneeled, because I was afraid of what would happen if I was meant to and didn't. Cassian didn't, simply stood and waited for me to rise before we made our way behind the two thrones. He stood off the left of the queen, a step behind her throne, and I off the right of the king, a step behind his, flanking them. I wished we hadn't been on the outside corners, so it would feel less like everyone was staring at me. Cassian didn't look my way, simply stared ahead, arms behind him, somehow looking both regal and relaxed.

I don't know how to describe the monotony of court in a way that would make it interesting rather than the soul-sucking pit of boredom that it was. Royals of some variety or another, important in ways I didn't understand the titles to, petitioned the kings for things I didn't understand. The word *Eligida* got bounced around a fair amount of times, always from the lips of the crowd speaking first, followed up by the queen, a clarification. The king left, his eyes beginning to close sometime into the session. The queen sighed through her nose and carried on.

Even if the matters had been interesting, I had no way of understanding them, which made it infinitely less so. My sword

-- left upstairs because there was no place on my dress from which to hang it, and Rhia made a face when I'd asked that told me it had been explicitly prohibited in the courtroom -- hummed to me at just the wrong frequency, turning my vision blurry as the hours wore on, a calling in my blood: *come back. Come back.*

Common people, villagers from the towns surrounding the castle, found their way in. The first, a woman well into middle age, made the gesture for respect I still hadn't the meaning for: *shoulder shoulder cross out*. I made it back, because I had thought it was polite, and realized, my face turning bright red as sounds of discontent wove their way through the court, that that was the wrong choice to make.

Cassian explained it to me that evening. The woman was escorted out before her request could be made.

A question was asked, to what I assumed was me: the word *Eligida* had become so much like a name that I responded to it on instinct, but the rest of the sentence was lost under a mound of Rhysean I didn't know. The petitioner that'd made the comment -- a young noble-sort that looked around mine and Cassian's age -- stared expectantly at me, his dark gaze piercing.

I stuttered, lost. My face was only beginning to turn red before Cassian gracefully cut in, rattling off an answer that seemed to please the boy before I'd had time to recover my head.

The sky was dark by the time we finally were excused, the court disbanding, heading back to their various own estates of whatever sort. The queen, Cassian, and I stayed until the rest of them had gone, I not daring to move until one of the other two on the dais did first.

Finally, as the boy who'd asked the question of me finally left, Cassian broke and turned towards me, sticking out his arms, finally not Cassian the King, but human -- tired and glad it was over. I fell into them like a fool, and I whispered

choice unfriendly words to him concerning carpal tunnel that made him laugh.

The queen cleared her throat. We broke apart. They exchanged words in Rhysean, Cassian and the queen, that ended in him thanking his mother and pulling me out a back door, breaking into a run as the door slammed behind us and we hurtled through back hallways. I was tripping over my dress and trying to hike it up with my free hand, laughing, until he pushed out a door that led to --

A bedroom. His bedroom.

I froze, because this was oddly intimate. He'd seen my room a dozen times -- most mornings, since he'd stopped knocking and running and started waiting on the floor outside my room in the morning. He'd sat at my desk as I struggled through children's readers on my bed as he and Rhia laughed and went on in Rhysean, a history between them I barely understood unravelling itself to anyone that could see them. He'd laid upside-down across my bed, me beside him, heads sticking over the edge so all the blood rushed to our brains, as we complained about the queen.

But this -- hadn't happened.

For someone who'd lived there for seventeen years, it looked remarkably... not-Cassian. The same sort of decor my room had was found in his, a bed and a desk and a wardrobe, a second door to a room I assumed was the bathroom. For all we decorate our rooms back home, line them with everything that makes up our souls, his was -- bare.

Books sat on the corner of his desk, but there were no shelves. Papers were strewn across the rest of the desk, and a jar of ink and a pen sat on top of them, but that was the most character the space had. A banner hung above his bed: the golden lion's head and crossed swords on midnight-blue backing.

It was -- god, I don't know. The part of me that had considered what his bedroom looked like had pictured it like a 17-year-old-boy's here: posters, a little-played guitar, lamps and pillows and a closet full of childhood.

He didn't notice my hesitation. *They'll bring dinner up here. Court days are always exhausting -- I need a break, I'm taking off my binder.* He disappeared into his closet before flopping onto his bed, sticking his head and shoulders over the edge so far I was convinced, for a moment, that he'd keep sliding and hit his head. His crown clattered to the ground, and he cursed: English, one of the ones I'd taught him as a joke, then frowned and said it a lot more vehemently in Rhysean. One arm reached to the floor to scoop it up and he put it onto his stomach, balancing precariously on the slowly-slipping king.

I felt the corner of my mouth quirk up. He was ridiculous, but he was known, like this, a creature I understood. I leaned against the doorway. Cassian frowned.

Sit down, he asked. *I know your feet hurt, because mine do. And then: You promised me stories, in exchange for your crown.*

I never promised, I said, both of us already aware of how obliging I'd be, *you commanded and assumed I would.*

He laughed, the sound wheezy from the way he hung. *I'm a king. Tell me a story, Ilyaas.*

We did this a lot: I begged stories from him about Rhysea, and he told me about growing up. He begged from me stories about my world -- about here -- and I told him about the best things I could, small things that wouldn't need explaining of impossibilities: Rhysea had magic, we had electricity as a substitute. I tried to make it sound like I missed it -- because, selfishly, as much as I complained about the training, as much as I hated how foolish I seemed, I was wanted, without a doubt. I was important -- and people told me as much -- I was

the main character of a fantasy novel that ended in victory and started in prophecy. I wasn't worrying about SAT scores and AP tests and homework, done late into the night, for the first time in years.

I missed people, friends, sometimes late at night, but hardly ever by light of day. And that faded, too, as the months wore on.

So I exaggerated the details. Made here a caricature of what it was, because I was afraid homesickness would set in for real if I told it the way it was -- the stars, in constellations familiar rather than foreign. The way the moon cast shadows across the lake, how at the right time of night you could cup the moonlight in your hands, how the cicadas sang and in the spring pollen coated everything so thick you could swipe your hand across the hood of your car and have it come off bright yellow.

That was what I would miss, if I allowed myself to dwell on it: those bits of the world that make your heart ache as you realize the scale of everything around you. There is a mundane sort of magic that lives in the woods of Georgia, that comes out at gloaming, and it finds its way into your heart and pulls if you don't guard against it.

So I joked about the tests, the teachers. I explained public school and received appropriate amounts of horrified dismay at the descriptions of the food and how straight-cis the public schools of the Bible Belt are and how sticky everything in those schools are, all the time, from too many years of continuous use and not nearly enough washing.

We ate, and kept telling stories, and sometime around midnight I found myself lying with my head on Cassian's stomach, laughing as I listened to him laugh, trying to throw pieces of bread into his mouth and failing more times than not.

It's a skill, he kept insisting, it can be learned if we try hard enough.

Laughter and midnights. I stole his crown and sang him songs that I knew, made him sing some back, walking songs and drinking songs and court arias, the kind that children stand in the middle of the ballroom to sing when their parents show them off to society.

I fell asleep there, still in my court dress. Cassian woke up before I truly did -- his shifting stirring me into somewhere half-awake, but he stayed silent, unsure by the light of day.

I went back to my room to change. Rhia was there, waiting -- she shot up, taking in my wrinkled dress and bedhead and the song I was humming, a marching song that stuck from the night before.

She opened her mouth, then closed it again, unsure. *Ilyaas -- did the -- did you and -- Cassian -- are you --*

She didn't seem to know how to form that sentence, but her meaning was clear enough: my face flushed at her insinuation, ears burning. *No, I snapped. No -- we. Talked. And it was late and I fell asleep. Nothing more happened.*

Cassian *didn't*. We were both somewhere between ace and demi, in here-terms. We *didn't*. Do *that*. Fundamentally, as people.

She pursed her lips but didn't comment, helped me out of the dress and into clothes meant for fighting.

And life continued, in that way, for six weeks: mornings training. Afternoons into the evenings at court, sometimes with Cassian opposite me, sometimes alone with the kings, silent on a pedestal.

He had other things to do -- soldiers to train, a country to learn to run, a poet to find. I had no such excuse -- so day after day I stood.

My Rhysean came to a screeching halt -- it's impossible to pick up words when the people around you speak a million miles an hour, when they hardly ever have the object to which they're referring. Dinners were spent in silence, Cassian and I no longer allowed to dine elsewhere.

And -- I learned nothing more, for six weeks. The one time I asked the queen at dinner for my lessons to resume with Rhia: *please, king, I fear I will not learn what I need to, I ask that you give me an afternoon to spend with the menstrana de eligida* -- it was shut down.

You will have Cassian to translate. Or, you will learn the more you stay in court.

And I asked -- *please, king, I fear I do not know what I am fighting for, I ask that you let me go and see the people --*

Not until you can carry yourself without fear of tripping over your own sword.

And, god, I hated it -- for all she talked about expecting me to be better, expecting me to learn to become the Vatakina Eligida, of living up to the expectations she'd created -- she trapped me. Didn't want me to go any further than the walls of the castle. Didn't want me to learn more than what she deemed safe, somewhere within her convoluted mind.

I didn't doubt that Cassian was doing right, but I doubted the queen. And it sparked a tiny rebellion, down in my stomach, that refused to burn itself out.

I wanted to know more. I wanted to prove myself -- *savior of Rhysea, good with a sword, quick with her words.*

Call it the AP kid in me. Call it whatever the hell you'd like -- insecurity, self-righteousness, a savior complex.

But it didn't stop me from cornering Rhia, late one night after court, after dinner, and begging her to teach me everything the queen said I should not.

And she looked at me, blinked once, twice, three times, and agreed without another thought.

This was the beginning of our understanding. This was also the end of the beginning.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

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Back Again, Back Again: Lessons and Teachers

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twelve: Lessons and Teachers.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: Rhia brought me a list the next day of words she thought I needed to know. That night, under the stars, we worked through the list together, laughing. Each Rhysesan word had a story to go with it in her strange old English -- when she'd learned the words she now taught me -- whether they came from the home she hardly remembered or with Cassian, sitting around the dining table with the Kings back when she was still small. Each time she brought up Cassian, it was a glimpse into their shared history: a look into the friendship they shared, however stilted it had become by the roles they had to play. She explained to me, love in her voice, that the woman that had taught her English -- the old *menstrana de eligida*, the one that had been trained in case I had come then -- had created a story for each new word she taught her, so they would all stick in her head. Just like Rhia did for me, then.

We burned each list before the sun came up, and she presented me with a new one every night before we began to wander.

She laughed at me a lot, but that's probably because I sounded like the equivalent of the boys in my Spanish class drawling out words in their thick southern accents.

Ehs-scree-bihr. Coh-mehn-zahr. It was fine that she laughed, after I got over the first embarrassment of it -- her laugh was beautiful, out in the starlight, free and wild, full of joy. She showed me how to write in pretty calligraphy like she was taught, with heavy nibbed pens and a bottle of ink, even though I smeared it before it dried, most of the time. She snuck me out onto the roof via the trellises and the archways, that, if you kept your balance on just so, you could scatter across without falling.

I learned more words than Cassian had taught me, than I ever learned in court, but I kept them a secret -- because she would tell me to, with thick worry lines between her brows as she did so. *Don't tell. Don't let them know.* Even though this was what I had come to her for, to become a better version of Ilyaas, I wouldn't betray her trust by speaking them aloud by day.

But it had benefits, this silence: I started to pick up more words in the days I spent in court. They talked much faster than we ever did, her exaggeratedly slow, me stumbling over my words as I tried to conjugate verbs and set up the correct sentence structure in my head as the words tripped out. But they were there -- words I wasn't supposed to know -- *kill* and *treason* and *growing numbers*. Cassian and I sparred and I surprised him by cursing my loss in Rhysaen, and in the moonlight Rhia and I would shove our window open and explore.

The conversations at dinner began to make ounces of sense -- the ones the kings and Cassian had in Rhysean, the ones they switched languages for because they didn't want me to know. But

I kept that to myself, too, little bits of knowledge to save for a later day.

I taught Rhia more English, too, and told her about my world. This -- world. Somewhere far away -- maybe sitting in the same place in a different dimension -- a girl knows the words for *record player* and *cell phone* and *camera* and all the slang I could remember -- though I won't dare to contaminate this record with that last bit. It was -- cute, in the platonic-love sort of way, hearing her formal English and Rhysaen accent come out around concepts I thought I'd left behind.

And life continued, star-skies becoming a separate time than my days. Another party was planned, sometime in the future, as the kings and prince and I sat breakfast. I was given a speech and Rhia as a pronunciation guide and was told to memorize it for the occasion -- and, at my pleading, managed to reduce my time in court in order to dedicate energy to learning the words they'd set for me. The concepts the queen said the speech covered didn't quite match my knowledge of the language, but I attributed it to allusions and metaphor and nonliteral translations. I didn't always believe her, but Cassian assured me it was the right words. I believed him.

And one night, near a week before the new party, Rhia and I sat in my room sometime late in the night or early in the morning and contemplated how poorly my memorization was going.

I don't know your level of experience with foreign language, listener, but when you've got nothing to link it to, memorizing *sucks*. Because -- queen's orders -- beyond a brief overview of the speech, that was all I got. No word-for-word translations allowed. Rhia wasn't to define words for me if I asked, and this direct order circumvented the wild bits of starlight and gray area that we'd sought out in the weeks past -- and she kept quiet, no matter how much I pestered or pleaded

or teased. This was annoying, at the time, but it didn't set off red flags, gods know why.

But, either way, it was late at night or early in the morning, and we were both procrastinating. I knew it wasn't going well when she put a hand on my jaw to try and force my mouth into the right shape for one particularly long word.

We have time, she said, somewhat desperately.

We have time, I echoed back, about as despairingly.

We didn't have that much time. But also, the thought of trying to remember the difference between *noc* and *niltim* and *nocim* and *iltim* made me want to cry.

Rhia flopped down on the bed. *I have an idea*, she said, *but it's a bad one*.

Anything that stopped me from wanting to stab myself with my sword sounded like a good idea to me. *I'm in*.

She kicked at me from where I sat on the edge of the bed. *You don't even know the plan*.

Plan? I'm intrigued.

She hesitated. *There's a tavern. Three -- what's the word -- hamlets over. It's not -- fancy -- but it's interesting. There's music*.

I was sold. *I'm all for music. And a lack of fance. And --*

You're not allowed to say a word, she said, *because we don't speak like The Book there, understand? You either use Rhysean or you keep your mouth shut. And you leave the sword behind. And you cover your hair*.

And we're back by dawn, I added, *because Cassian will show up around then to drag me outside and make me run with him*.

It's a deal, she said. *I know a way. Let us go*.

So... we snuck out through the open window. Rhia braided my hair up and around my head into a crown, and I pulled a hooded cloak from my wardrobe to complete the disguise. We whispered

our way across the rooflines and shuffled our way along window ledges until we reached the ground, then, giggling, my heart in my throat, ran for the treeline, our shoes making the faintest patterning noises along the ground. Clutching my hand in the dark and moonlight, the trees looming over us, breathing in their own, Rhia pulled me through the woods until we emerged out into a clearing, far from the city center.

The tavern, as the sign said, was called *Eligidanim Traem*.

It's -- not an easy thing to translate? *Eligidanim* is, like... we choose. But -- but excluding the *you* of *we*. *The rest of us, not you*. And *Traem*... is a funny word. It has two translations, as Rhia explained it to me. It's the name for a cheap kind of ale -- it's the kind of stuff you down if you're specifically trying to get drunk. But -- it's also a word for *decisions*... or, like *fates*? Kind of? Like... the combination of those two. Where choice and destiny meet. Because -- the joke is -- if you're drinking *Traem*, you're making the choice to give up the logical parts of your brain. Your rationale -- whatever. You're leaving it to destiny to not get your ass handed to you while you're on the stuff. So the name -- *we, not you, choose cheap beer* -- is odd, but a fine enough name for a tavern. But the name -- *we, not you, decide our destiny* -- and in combination with the word *Eligidanim*, that's a more accurate translation, it's -- well. It's the kind of place you find rebellion.

And -- as we made our way towards it, lights cast low in the houses all around us and the faintest smell of smoke on the air, I realized where we were.

This was the hamlet that Cassian and I had marched through after we burned the rebellion. The people had watched us pass. And though we had come as heroes, had come to take down the rebels, had come under the guise of peace and order, a place

that screamed to all who came *we choose our destiny, not you* seemed to be the type Cassian had been looking to send a message to when he and his soldiers had burned the rebels they'd killed.

Although I had tried not to think about it at the time, there was probably family of those we had killed in this town.

I double-checked that my hood was still on my head, and, feeling slightly more apprehensive, followed Rhia inside.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

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Back Again, Back Again: We Choose Our Own Destinies

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode thirteen: We choose our own destinies.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: Luckily, it also meant that no soldiers of the crown would be caught drinking in a tavern so delicately walking the line between a drunk den and a rebel house.

It was loud inside, and despite my fears, it didn't go questing-movie silent as we walked in. No one turned to look at us or spit in my face or anything -- and though I kept nervously checking to make sure my hood wasn't showing any of my hair, I wasn't the only one with my hood up, so it was hardly odd.

Rhia found us a table towards the back, near one of the hearths that roared with fire -- it was too hot an evening for most people to want this sort of heat. Rhysea stayed useasonably

warm, their autumn much longer than Georgia ever offered, and stayed warmer even longer than the south I knew. They were the few tables in the establishment that still remained empty.

And then Rhia disappeared, instructing me not to leave or talk to anyone in the most simple Rhysean she could manage as she left to track down a server or -- something. A boy around my age set a flagon down in front of me with a smile and said something I didn't understand -- so I nodded, trying to look gruff and brooding so he'd leave -- but didn't drink from it, because I didn't know if it was poisoned or how much it cost or if we'd even brought money at all. I hadn't asked. I hadn't thought of it. It smelled weird, though, like oranges gone to mush. That gross old-citrus-y smell. It was Traem, as I later found out.

It's shit, by the way, as far as liquor goes. Though I don't suppose you drink this stuff for the taste.

Rhia came back a few minutes later, dragging a girl with her so flirtatiously I figured they had to be some sort of involved.

Rhia sat herself down in the chair opposite mine. The girl -- who'd been in the corner playing some sort of oddly-shaped card game -- perched on the edge of the table.

She introduced her as a *friend*, putting the emphasis on the word in a way that implied they'd definitely seen each other in

a lot less clothing and a lot more privately several times. If Rhia ever said her name, I didn't catch it, as they were speaking Rhysean much too fast for me to catch much of anything. The words I did get were *flowers* and *lover* and *me* and *game* -- or, more *an entertainment*.

Lover? I parroted back, one of the few words I'd caught.

Rhia stared blankly back. *I don't know what you mean*, she said in slow Rhysean, as if it were a joke. Then the other girl said something like *drink* and made a motion of downing a glass, pointing to the flagon in front of me, and with a nod from Rhia, I tried to block out the smell and tentatively raised it to my lips, taking a sip.

And instantly started sputtering, because it was like lemon-scented windex and dirt and piss all at once. They both laughed; Rhia snagged the glass and poured at least half of it down her throat, and then they started talking so fast I didn't know anything at all.

The two of them disappeared again -- Rhia sitting in the same chair as the girl back at the cards table, the girl slipping her something from the stack of winning she was collecting that made Rhia laugh -- the free, wild laugh I'd come to know in the starlight.

I quickly looked away, feeling like it was too private to watch. A bard-type -- another kid around my age, with onyx-black

hair in tight coils that moved with their head and barely missed catching on their shoulders -- swept back and forth several tables away, hands moving wildly. They were night-sky dark and unfairly gorgeous and had some kind of... lute? -- stringed-instrument thingy -- pushed on a strap back over their shoulder.

They were pontificating to a group of disinterested teen-adult types in the corner. Although the din was too loud all around me to have any sort of idea what they were saying, the bard finally looked frustrated enough that they stood up on the table and picked up their lute.

Everyone went quiet at this. The tavern held its breath, for the space of six, seven seconds, and apprehension glossed over their eyes for just a second before they began to sing.

I'll never be able to describe their voice in a way that accurately encapsulates how it sounds. It sent goose bumps running along my skin and -- do you know what it sounds like for a choir to sing in a packed cathedral? The air is warm and alive with the breaths of a thousand people but they're all holding theirs as harmony echoes its way through the rafters and towards them.

That isn't the bard's voice. But that's the feeling that it gave. No matter how many times I heard them sing, the reaction

was always the same. Like -- Orpheus, from Greek mythology. When they sang, the world couldn't help but lean in and listen.

This is Leander. You're just now meeting them, but they'll be back. And they'll be more important than you know. Then I knew -- could ever have known.

But not yet. There's still miles to go before we reach their road.

And the song? It starts off slow -- it always did. And I can't sing, can't become a bard or bring your ears anything other than pain with my voice, but -- all the same. Something like this -- but in Rhysean, much prettier, in a voice like Orpheus. Do me the favor of imagining it so.

I do know how this will end. With one of us crowned and one of us dead. And I, oh I, tell the story still. Waiting for my cup to fill. But before then, days stretch ahead. But before then, there's road still ahead.

And then -- we all know this part. The prophecy told on my sword: there will come a soldier, there will come a poet, there will come a ruler, who will bring the tyrant low.

And it changed, from there. I didn't know the song at the time -- the voice was the only thing I knew, but even I realized the words weren't the same as it went along. Same tune, different words, and it became something everyone knew -- a great Experience, capital E, as all in the tavern began to join

in a story they'd obviously heard many times before. *There will come a soldier, there will come a poet, there will come a King who will right this broken world.* Someone was pounding on the table in time with the lute, and all were singing and dancing around the tables. I got so caught up in this I didn't even realize the danger as the boy who brought me my drink pulled me up to dance, but my hood fell back as I stood and --

The place Rhia chose to sit turned out to have been rather inauspicious. For the fire burned bright and hid nothing, and there's only one person who had hair like mine.

And they had watched her set fire to the bodies of their friends.

It turned out that my earlier fears were right -- that those that had fallen were not the only ones aligned with the rebel cause. I may have been the Girl That Starts It All -- the rumored prophecy child, the rumored soldier/poet/king, but I was a way they could have vengeance with no king's soldiers to stop them.

I understood close to nothing. Rhia stood on a table and yelled something about not telling anyone, and that I would help them, that it was safest for me if they said nothing.

But isn't that the wrong thing to say to those who had spent their lives anything but safe? Isn't that the wrong thing

to say, that I would help them, when I had spent all my time there doing anything but?

It's hard to lay blame, looking back. To spite them for spiting me, not when I'd done so much wrong.

They knew I worked for the palace. And they had too much fire in their bellies for reason.

O judgement! Thou have fled to brutish beasts, and men have lost their reason.

Rhia was beside me in a moment. She looked frightened, and we ran.

We made it all the way through the woods, my heart in my throat in a very different sort of way, and suddenly, ironically, I was thankful for all the mornings Cassian forced me running with him because I wasn't gasping for air quite like I could be.

I was shaky scaling the trellis back up to my room. The people of *Elegidanim Traem* weren't stupid enough to follow this far, but fear still made my throat raw and it only got worse as I started to see the sky turn pink at the horizon's edge. I started to curse -- because *shit, shit, Cassian* --

We clambered in through the window and it became horribly clear that I was right to be worried.

Cassian sat on the edge of my bed. And he did not look happy.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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Back Again, Back Again: Truth and Consequence

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode fourteen: Truth and Consequences.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: Cassian was not happy. This was blatantly obvious. He was making the disgruntled face he did when I beat him in the stupid games we played, except this time it was overlayed with anger and -- fear, rather than just annoyance.

Also, there were guards with him.

Ilyaas, he said, and it turned more into worry than anger. I opened my mouth, ready for bullshit or truth or something in between, but he cut me off before I could make a story. I've already called the guards. They're out looking for you.

Not *the two of you. You.* Just me. Rhia didn't flinch -- her head was tucked down nearly to her chest. She didn't look like

the girl I'd spent every night running around with or the girl that joked with Cassian. She looked like -- a servant. She was so much more than that. *I've been here for half an hour.*

You haven't --

Told my mother? Who chose my dresses and made me know the weight of my position at dinner and made sure I knew she was in charge. I woke the power and I fought for her, but she was the ruler -- that was just it. She was the ruler. And she could make things worse for me. I had a sword but barely knew how to swing it, I had magic that I hadn't figured out how to use beyond that first accidental time, disappearing a girl to Somewhere Else, capitalized for emphasis. He grimaced. *I did.*

That was -- It hurt, I won't lie. *Where could I have gone that I wouldn't come back from? Where else do I know?*

Where did you go? He asked. Prying.

I -- Rhia didn't lift her head. And she looked small and her getting in trouble for something that was only a problem because I'd done it was -- not something I wanted to face. I didn't want to see it in her face, have her pull away because she was afraid.

We'd become friends, without pretense or position or anything else. She didn't expect me to save or raze this world, and, selfishly, I cared most about not losing that. Not losing

-- ease. Not losing moonlight and rooftops and jokes and words learned in secret.

So I lied and told a story. I said it was my fault, that I had wanted to go out and ran away and that Rhia had had no choice but to go after me. I left out our moonlight roof spelunking and the letters she'd taught me -- because I wasn't stupid -- but told him that I hadn't gotten far before Rhia convinced me to go back. The tavern didn't exist. It was just half a walk in the woods before we clambered in through my window.

It was that stupid speech, I told him. I couldn't remember it all and I got bored and restless and wanted to see something else. I've been stuck for weeks.

He called back the guards. Eight had been sent after me, and they all crowded into my room, staring. I didn't know what to do, but they were all looking at me. Between me and Cassian.

She's here, he finally said, in Rhysean. Someone get my mother.

Rhia still hadn't moved. And she certainly didn't look up when the queen swept in seconds after that. She was... somewhere between concern and anger, physically, but her eyes were flashing with a dangerous sort of light.

Where did you go? She snapped.

For a walk, I said, meeting her eyes. I kept my voice soft, trying to be a perfect little soldier. I was bored.

For a second I thought she would slap me. But then, she lowered her hand back down and leveled me with a long, even stare. *It's not safe, she said finally. There are those out there who would want to kill you.*

Like the girl who stabbed me? I asked. Though I healed fast, it left a nasty scar, like stitches that hadn't gone in quite right. The wound was raised and red and crooked, two and a half inches long and not far from the top of my left lung. I used to sit and rub at it, nervous habit that simply became habit after too many years. I still do, even though it's not there.

She pursed her lips. *Like her. Like her group. They won't be happy until one of their own sits on the throne.*

It was true that they hadn't seemed happy earlier that night.

She turned then to Rhia. *And where were you?*

She tried to stop me, I supplied.

I didn't ask you, she snapped. *Menstrana de. Answer me.* Since the queen had swept in the four of us had spoken in nothing but English. The guards that crowded the room watched with interest, eyes going back and forth like they were watching

a game, even though beyond the queen's harsh tone they wouldn't have had an idea of what was being said.

Rhia raised up her head and, eyes trained somewhere to the left of the queen's face, answered, *with the vatakina eligida*.

The queen did slap her. Fast, like a snake, and her hand was back at her side before any of us could say anything to protest. I was shocked silent. The look Rhia was giving me was saying not to interfere, not to make it worse, but one part of me wanted to disappear the queen too and the other part wanted to keep my mouth shut because I really didn't want to get hurt.

Don't let it happen again.

The queen considered us for a long minute before sweeping back out. Cassian leveled me a long stare. *I would've gone with you*, he said, finally. *If you had asked, I'd have followed you anywhere*. And he, too, made to leave, pausing in the doorway and turning back. Something like resolve sat in his eyes. *I'll see you in an hour*, he said. *For training*.

And he, too, was gone, taking the guards with him.

Except for one -- who stayed outside the door. To keep us in, not to keep others out, as it turned out. A new feature.

Rhia and I stood in silence for several minutes before she whispered an *I'm sorry*, so small I almost missed it.

She unfroze, then, and pulled a set of sparring clothes from the wardrobe and let my hair out of its braids -- not that they'd done much good, after all.

As I stared at her through the mirror, her cheek red, all I could think was, *you shouldn't have to be sorry.*

That was the day I learned about truth and consequence. Or -- lies and consequence. And classism and how no one is quite as good as they seem and, most of all, what the queen really was.

When I got back from my run, bone-tired but Cassian refusing to let me stop, there was a new lock on my window. I didn't have the key, and neither did Rhia.

Truth or consequence. Veritad et consequentia.

(Silence)

I know it's stupid, but I couldn't sleep last night. It was the first night since I've gotten back that I wasn't asleep before midnight. I know that it's some kind of stupid superstition I created in the hopes of sending myself home, but I can't shake the sick feeling in my gut that now I won't get back. Two AM meant I was exhausted for school -- what eight hours of sleep on a normal sleep schedule will do for you -- but that doesn't matter as much as that I'm scared the magic will never come back. That I'll never see Rhysea again.

That's my truth. Now I'll face the consequence.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

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Back Again, Back Again: In Starlight, Part One

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode fifteen: In Starlight.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: Cassian pulled me away from Rhia more and more as the days following the incident wore on. I didn't catch on, at first -- I thought it was an apology, a way to try and repair the gap that had formed from him calling for his mother when I'd disappeared -- the very person we'd silently agreed to roll our eyes at whenever she was acting ridiculous.

So I was happy to be pulled along -- because for as easy as it was with Rhia, it was safe with Cassian -- he could pull me onto the roofs in the middle of the night without fear of consequence -- which Rhia and I could no longer do, now that there was a lock on our window. We could roam the castle without

fear, without sneaking around, even when most of the castle was dead asleep and we were meant to be, too -- because as long as I was with him, there was purpose to our movement to everyone we disturbed, *a the soldier and king are on business, not a the eligida and menstrana de are doing something wrong.*

And -- I hated fighting with him. Hated the morning after the Eligidanim Traem where we sparred in stony silence, where he offered no apologies beating me and I thought, with that awful kind of angered satisfaction as I managed to hit him all of once -- hard, with the pommel of my sword -- *good.*

I watched the bruise swell on Rhia's cheek, and remembered Cassian's words -- *you haven't -- told my mother?*, and linked the act of violence to the expression he'd had. Linked the way Rhia refused to look into the queen's eyes -- and Cassian's, when he turned into a prince, not our *friend* -- to what he stood for.

I should've taken that, there. A hint, a clue. *The queen isn't all good. And you stand with her. And Cassian does what she says.*

But -- as the days passed, after that angry morning and afternoon in court where, like a child, *I hate this I hate this I hate this* raged in my head, I tried to let go -- I asked Rhia if she was alright and let her *of course* lift the burden of guilt from my heart, even though her response was forced. But

isn't that human nature? To ask a friend if they're alright while hoping the answer is yes, even if you know it's not true? Because then you can check it off your to-do list, then you can say *I've tried, I can't help someone that doesn't want me to* and move on. Conscience alleviated, emotional burdens avoided. *I'm fine. Okay.* And that makes me terrible in a thousand ways, tiny and large. I know it, I do.

But it was easier to let the anger shake off. It was easier to separate Cassian and the queen in my mind, was easier to say he couldn't have known -- because, to some degree, how could he have? He was a child with a role to play, just like I was, just like Rhia was. For whatever was said of prophecy, of us making the decisions, we'd yet to realize that. We'd assumed the adults knew better.

God, they didn't. Gods, they really didn't.

But it would take time. For us to figure that out.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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Back Again, Back Again: In Starlight, Part Two

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode fifteen: In Starlight.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: It was the day before the speech, before the party, and Cassian and I lay on the roof. It was quite late, or quite early, but the passage of time wasn't felt nearly as hard in Rhysea as it is here. We'd climbed through a window in a room I'd never been to before -- an empty bedchamber meant for guests, stripped of sheets to prevent bugs -- just a bare mattress on a bedframe, a mirror on a wall and a dresser in the corner. But the window opened so smoothly that it told me Cassian had done this many times before, because wooden frames warp; they stick with disuse and protest against their opening. The window was situated perfectly in the eaves of the castle,

nestled in the crack of two rooflines, a slanted v opening up. It was climbable, if you tried, and led to all sorts of interesting places if you dared.

We dared.

It wasn't the same as with Rhia -- where every moment we spent was giggling nervous energy, waiting to be caught before we knew of *veritad et consequentia*, where every moment with Rhia was learning strange constellations and strange words and uncomplicated, unpolitical friendship, Cassian and I, in contrast, were seekers and dreamers, wandering, making noise and laughing without fear.

I don't know how to describe the difference. Cassian was knowing gloaming had come to an end, becoming bolder to face the night ahead. Rhia was the soft hope that came with the promise of sunrise.

Neither was bad. Both have their place in the world.

But it was the night before the speech, and Cassian and I lay on the rooftop, having cursed and fumbled and laughed our way there. I lay, as had become habit, with my head on his stomach, and he'd tucked his hands behind his head, a cradle, a pillow.

What will it be like, tomorrow? I asked, listening to his breathing as we stared up at the stars. I'd spent all but the last three months of my life staring upwards and searching for

ursa minor -- even now, in this strange place, I looked for the little dipper and found nothing but scattered starlight filling in the gaps of the sky back home. Strange constellations, no ursa minor in sight.

Cassian shifted, bending one leg up towards his chest. He still wore his court clothes, his binder underneath them, having spent the day in meetings with his father the king -- and having finished the meetings out himself, after the king excused himself around midafternoon. He'd missed dinner -- which had made it a silent and slightly excruciating affair, the kings exchanging Rhysean while I, as the queen prompted, stumbled through phrases that'd been drilled into my head -- and he'd burst into my room shortly after my return and begged, in as close as Cassian ever got to begging, to get away.

I didn't hesitate to follow him.

It'll be like the first night, he said. There will be dignitaries and faces you've seen in court. Folk from the towns around here have been invited, in small quantities -- and will be checked as they enter for malicious intent, but it is good for the people. They should see who we are. He coughed. Dancing, of course, and music both will be present. There's no feast predating this one -- which I thank the stars for, banquet hall days are hell. I will give a speech. The kings will give a speech. You will give a speech.

My speech -- I tried. What does it mean? This still had not been told to me, and word-for-word translations Rhia was not allowed to give -- from a distance, this can be reflected as keeping my knowledge of Rhysean low to make it easier for opinions to be fed to me -- independent thought is harder with limited vocabulary. But at the time -- again, I hadn't thought anything of it, too wrapped up in being a prophecy child, too wrapped up in Cassian and whatever we had become.

Well -- he said. You extend the invitation to find the poet.

I sat up. *Shit, really?*

He nodded.

Oh, shit -- I grinned, pulled my hands over my face. This is happening. We'll have our third?

A soldier-poet-king, Cassian confirmed, sitting up too. It will take time. There will be a festival, and -- hells forbid -- banquets. And long nights of music until we find the one.

I performed celebratory actions too terrible to put into words -- but it involved small amounts of victory dancing.

I stopped. *What happens to us when we find them?*

He grinned crookedly. *We win.*

I flopped back down onto the rooftop next to him. *We win.* It was said like a promise, a surety of what was to-come. All that came with it: battles and death, riding far away and

bringing down a tyrant, *righting this broken world* as the bard had sung --

It would come.

He tilted his chin back and looked up at the stars. *But before all of that, there's tomorrow.* His voice had lost some of its surety, cracked like a child's.

There is, I answered, not quite sure where he was going, not quite sure why it was making my heart beat erratically.

He cleared his throat. *There'll be -- dancing.*

I laughed, an odd bleating *ha-ha* that betrayed the anxiety that had sparked in my stomach. *Yeah, but I don't know how. We seemed to be just fine the last time.*

I could -- he stopped, nervous-laughed, a pshhh through his nose. *I could -- teach you.*

This was not a king, demanding in the form of a question. This was a boy who wanted honesty. Who wanted a genuine yes, whatever jokes he made.

I did not look at him as I responded, because I was a coward and fool. *I mean -- that would be nice -- but we're on a roof. And we don't have music.*

The roof is flat enough, here. And -- we'd be fine. Without music.

A brave ambition, I said, but stood up, my limbs entirely too stiff and odd, disconnected, not feeling like they entirely belonged to me.

He stood up, too, and suddenly the twelve inches between us seemed entirely too close for comfort. This was not Cassian the king. This was Cassian the boy, Cassian the unsure.

Cassian, who was crossing a line with this request. Cassian, who was asking, gently, as he always did when it mattered with me, for something more than sparring partners on the same side of a war.

And I was fine with it. I was so, so fine with it.

Anger melts off easily when it comes to pretty boys and questions like this.

Can I -- he asked, and reached for my hand. I held it out to him, and tried not to laugh as a default to my fear, scared of breaking this moment.

He pulled me closer to him, slowly, the distance becoming nine, six, three inches in baby steps. *Is this alright?* He asked, and put his hand on my lower back, so we stood like lovers in a ballroom, waltzers at a party.

Of course, I breathed, and flicked my eyes up to his. He stared back down at me, face hung an inch from mine. I jerked my gaze back down, staring resolutely over his shoulder, ignoring

the pounding of my heart and wild heat in my ears with minimal success.

Cassian froze, for the space of one breath, two, before catching himself. His breathing was shallow, but he cleared his throat and tapped the toes of his left foot to my right. *It starts with you taking a step back*, he murmured, so I did, staring down at our feet, not daring to look up. *Now your left, out to the side*. I matched his step. *Now forwards, and out to the side again -- right foot, this time*.

The waltz began like that -- *careful*, he said, and we stepped through that several times, neither of us daring to look up. Or -- at least, I didn't.

Now this -- he murmured, *step out to present* -- his hand slid hand off my waist as he stepped out to the side -- I matched him, raising my outside arm, his touch feather-light on my other hand.

He tapped his outside foot -- *out, behind, out, in* -- and I matched him, then he gently pulled me back in, stepping towards me, and I forgot to look down as I stepped in to meet him --

The world froze. There was Cassian, dark eyes and sepia skin, curly hair and regal bearing -- eyes boring into mine. Searching. We were an inch apart and had forgotten about dancing. The stars hung behind him, blurry and out of focus, because there. Was. Cassian.

I cleared my throat and stepped away, turning my back to him and pulling a hand up to rub the side of my face. I was breathing hard -- harder than I should have been, and tried to conceal it in that shitty way you do after running too short a distance to justify being out of breath: long, shallow breaths, face burning, heart stuttering.

He laughed -- not ha-ha funny, but the sort of nervous *oh shit* I'd been trying not to make myself. I glanced at him from the corner of my eye -- he stood, similarly, profile, arms folded across his chest, one hand raking through his hair.

I'm sorry -- we both said, same time, then went silent. I turned to him -- and he shifted, so we faced each other again.

Silence, staring at each other, trying to figure out how to proceed.

And then, carefully, from Cassian: *I don't think that was a mistake, though.*

I pursed my lips. *Neither do I.*

He hesitated, took half a step towards me before stuttering into inaction.

What -- do we do? From here? I asked, finally, afraid of his answer: I couldn't imagine something that either of us could say that would make everything go back to normal.

Go to bed, Cassian said. *Reevaluate during daylight hours.*

I agree, I responded. *Logical. Practical.* I continued, with a string of synonyms that more highlighted the awkwardness rather than alleviating it, then started walking back towards the window from whence we came.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out.
"Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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Back Again, Back Again: Gold, Part One

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode seventeen: Gold.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Rhia and I spent a morning together for the first time in weeks the day of the feast, and it was like coming home.

Or -- better than coming home. Like -- finding Rhysea again. She said she'd missed seeing me, and that was when I'd realized with a start how little we'd seen of each other in the past weeks.

You lied for me, she'd said, hesitantly, knees pulled up to her chest as she sat in the desk chair.

I laughed bitterly, a spark of anger rekindling in my chest. *Not that it helped much. I should've said something else. I'm sorry.*

Rhia hugged her legs tighter. *It would've been worse. Trust me.* She made a face, and changed the subject, like she'd said something she regretted.

And... she didn't mention it beyond that -- my absence or the events of the tavern night -- because she was Rhia. Because she'd been so heavily reminded of our places in this world, and was hesitant to cross the line. Because *are you fine? Of course,* was a kind lie, one that I'd believed for ease's sake.

We didn't talk about that. Instead, she helped me dress even though it was hours away from time for the festival. I was forbidden from leaving the room until the evening -- for I was a surprise, spoilable, and it would leave a greater impact if no one saw the eligida until the evening came.

So we sat in my room, I in a pretty golden-and-Royal's-blue, midnight-blue dress, high-collared to hide the crooked scar of where I'd been stabbed. There was a dangerous message in the wound, a disquiet that came with showing weakness: *the eligida is not made of impossibilities and immortality. She can fall, despite her magic. Maybe she isn't the savior, long-dreamt.*

There's danger in disquiet. High collars disguised in embroidery and luxury are a good way to keep opinions fixed.

My hair was curly-wild, unrestricted by pins, which meant it fell into my face and I got hair in my mouth and, as the day

wore on, frizz appeared, as it was aught to do. I bemoaned it, as I did practically every day, but with nothing else to do, it seemed particularly dramatic today. Rhia laughed at my antics, curled up in the desk chair. I sprawled out dramatically across the floor, fancying myself a renaissance painting or some shit with the way my dress fanned out around me. It didn't help my mood, or pass the time for long.

It wasn't even noon. The festival wasn't until evening.

What do we doooo, I moaned, so Rhia told me to recite my speech, something I did so many times over the words became a dull rumble in my mind, blurring together as I forgot the pauses, forgot the separation of the words until they were cut into the wrong pieces and what I was saying was *not* Rhysean.

Ilyaas, she sighed, and repeated the section I'd muddled, enunciating the words over and over until I mimicked them back at her.

You know this speech as well as I do, I groaned, still on the floor. *Can you give it for me? Please?* I sat up. *Or can I give it, in English, and you stand and speak over me in Rhysean translation? Like a voice-over?*

She rolled her eyes. *I am staying in this room. You will have to give the speech on your own, Eligidida.*

Eligidida. It sounded as stupid as it meant -- little savior, poor savior, a joke. I moaned in a distinctly non-human

way. *This would be so much easier if I just knew what it meant*
--

You know I can't.

Why not? That spark of anger hadn't let itself out, was threatening to grow. I wanted a confirmation, now -- that the queen was keeping things from me.

It wouldn't be proper, was her half-hearted response. We lapsed into silence, minutes stretching out in the humid almost-thunderstorm-y weather, until, very carefully, she closed her eyes and began to speak.

It took me a minute to recognise that it was the speech.

Dear friends, she said. *I am here because of the rulers who stand before you. Cassius Rex found me and I have taken the sword from the tree, which means the final days of the rebel's tyranny draw near.*

You fight on the right path, the speech promised. *The path that I walk, that the noble kings and their son have led me down, is the path to righteousness and restoration of order. Many of the peasantry have been seduced by the sound of drums, by a false promise of tomorrow. Only standing in order, the law on your side, will ensure victory.*

The rebels grow stronger. But none are stronger than the force of the chosen three. My sovereign, king, I, his sword, his soldier, and a third, his poet.

But we do not yet have a poet. This is what I come here tonight to ask you for.

Search the lands. Send us your musicians, your writers, your dreamers. Send us those whose words make the sky weep and the flowers bloom. And bring them here.

In four weeks, we will have a festival to find this poet. Each performer and patron will be presented before myself and the court to play -- and the winner, our poet, will join the histories yet-to-come. The sponsor, of course, will be rewarded generously.

But for tonight -- eat and drink. Dance, if the urge so strikes you. Thank your kings as I do for the peace they strive towards.

Rellemom a Rex. Thank your kings.

Rhia opened her eyes again, frowning. She'd stumbled through it, repeating over lines and fiddling with translations, but each word she'd strung together had given me more knowledge, more strength.

Thank you, I said. Gratinoc. I hesitated. Why?

Her frown deepened. Because you deserve to know.

It wasn't anything I hadn't known, in a rotund, obtuse sort of way -- nothing I hadn't inferred or heard said -- but it was odd, to know that those same sentiments had been coming out of my mouth without any idea of their meaning. I'd scanned it,

sonnet-style, for gods' sake, rapped and rhymed the middle section to a little tune to put it into my mind -- theatre tricks. But --

Cassian hadn't lied. I felt a certain relief in that.

But there was more to it than what I'd been told, too. Ideas I'd only seen acted, never written down or spoken out loud for as far as I could understand were in paper and ink: *stand with the kings, or fall. The tyrant is here* -- it was the first time the words *rebels* and *tyrant* had truly been linked.

Gratinoc, I repeated. *I'll tell no one.*

I would not be the reason she was in trouble again.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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Back Again, Back Again: Gold, Part Two

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode eighteen: Gold.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: What else was there to do, now that that was done? We played hangman with an odd mix of Rhysean and English words -- she'd choose Rhysean, I English, both of us reaching for concepts we were certain the other hadn't heard of, each determined to win. I pulled the word *Munchausen* and argued that just because she didn't know the syndrome I meant didn't make my choice less valid. She chose the Rhysean word for *cottage in the woods*, a disastrous monster of a word, letters stretching into the twenties with a horrid combination of vowels. I couldn't remember it -- much less pronounce it -- if I tried.

How the hell would I know that? I asked, gesturing widely to the paper.

How the hell would I know that? She mimicked, jabbing one finger at *Munchausen*.

Theatre games -- party games -- were next, after we both got bored of being word-cruel to each other. I was just complaining at our lack of a third person to play the banger *zip zap zop* when, in an effort to show why it was so cool, I struck my hands in the motion all high-school theatre kids are familiar with -- one palm sliding outwards and past the other moving in, like rubbing your hands together for warmth, like water-bending, but less cool. And -- *shit*.

We both stopped dead. For, just a second as I'd made the motion, my hands had sparked with green-gold magic.

Rhia's eyes were wide as saucers. *Do it again*, she breathed, so I did, striking my hands across each other. They sparked to a glow again, stronger this time, and she let out a tiny, tiny squeak.

I stared, dumbstruck. Then did it again. And again. And again, the glow growing bigger every time.

Holy shit, I finally yelled, scrambling to my feet. *Holy shit -- Rhia -- holy shit!*

Magic -- she cried, a huge grin on her face. *Ilyaas, your magic -- !*

My magic, that I hadn't been able to find. My magic, that I hadn't been able to control.

Holy shit, I repeated.

Is that how you call it? She asked. *With your hands?* She mimicked the sliding motion. *Make it do something.*

Like what? I asked, my chest humming, eyes scraping the room for a trick to perform with. My gaze landed on a book on my bed, one of the children's primary books that had been dug up from the library for me. What was the most classic atypical thing to do? To prove your power? Make it float.

I struck my hands together and thrust my palms out, throwing my will into the motion. *Lift. Lift. Lift.* They sparked, maybe glowed slightly stronger than before, but -- nothing.

Shit, I cursed, and tried again. I narrowed my eyes and leaned into it, every ounce the fool, but nothing changed. Nothing moved. The glow died just as suddenly as it had come, the same as always happened with my sword, conduit that it was.

All it's doing is making the glow, same as the sword. I don't know how to command it.

Rhia blinked. *Command*, she mouthed, then let her legs slam to the floor and stood. She fumbled around for a piece of paper from the desk and set it on the bed. *Ilyaas, a command. Ask the magic to do what you want. Do not expect it to know.*

I struck my hands again, and feeling stupid, said *lift*.

It didn't move, not even when I stared till my eyes shook.

I looked back to Rhia. She was frowning, concentration coloring her face. *Try to say it in Rhysean. Erm -- the word for lift. Please-lift, you-lift, is -- viens. Pers, please. Viens, life.* She pronounced it, slowly, three times over, then motioned for me to try. *Viens*, she reminded, and mimed striking her hands like zip-zap-zop.

I took a deep breath -- in, out. Said the word in my mind -- gave it intention, asked and much as commanded, and let it leave my lips -- *viens, pers viens* -- as I pushed my palms past each other and out.

Magic sparked. The paper rose.

The paper rose.

Rhia yelped, a victory, and punched a fist in the air.

I beamed, disbelieving, dumbfounded, at the piece of paper buffeted by wind on all sides, never floating far before being held back in place.

Holy shit, was all that I could think. My brain was stuck on the idea of *magic*.

How did you know? I finally said, my voice rough and hollow-sounding. I couldn't bring myself to lower my eyes from the paper, was scared to drop my hand on fear the results could never be replicated.

She smiled, a small thing that crept up the side of her face. *It is in the old legends. They say that the last eligida talked to the wind.*

I laughed and dropped my hands. The paper fell, and I took Rhia's hands, spinning her round in a circle until I hit my hip on the bed and fell down cursing. I laughed through the pain, my eyes watering, hip smarting, and as she gave me a hand and helped me up, I asked, *tell me more?*

Regin, she said, *is to fold. pers regins -- please-fold, you-fold.*

We said it together, once, twice, three times, then I narrowed my eyes at the piece of paper and whispered *regins* as I struck my hands together. Still on the bed from where it had drifted, as I pictured it in my head, folding in half and fourths, the paper sloppily mimicked the idea I'd had, corners not lining up, not with smooth creases, but -- *it folded.*

We tried *fire* next, but that didn't work, so Rhia had me try to *burn* instead, which did -- the paper began to smoke and smoulder before catching into flames the more I focused -- on the bed, which, too, began to smoke and smoulder. We both freaked, and I dropped my hands -- but it only lessened the flame, didn't put it out, the natural course having taken over, so Rhia and I squeaked and smothered it with blankets and got water from the pitcher in the bathroom to put it out. The room

now smelled like smoke, and my quilt was damaged if you looked, but we were fine.

I think I need to lift it, first, I said. I knew the word for and -- *et*, same as Latin -- and with *viens et furums* a new piece of paper lifted and set itself aflame.

We let it burn itself out, become a pile of ash and nothing before I dropped it to the floor.

Rhia and I continued like that for several hours -- her giving me words, testing to see what worked and what didn't, until we found the magic responded to infinitive and intention rather than to-become. *To burn* instead of simply *fire*. *To lift* instead of *wind*.

As the time progressed, a headache built, pounding, in my skull. It was nothing, at first -- showing up after the second *to burn*, small and hardly meaningful, until it grew, and grew, me trying to ignore it, wanting to keep discovering.

But my blood was humming in the wrong key -- and a *danger*, *danger*, flashed behind my eyes so loud and sudden that I stumbled backwards and sat down, hard. What had been good, a rightening of my balance at first had become painful and heart-shaking, a thundering in my ears as my body flushed and my heart worked overtime.

A wave of nausea struck me, hard and fast, and it took all of my effort not to throw up all over my pretty midnight-gold

dress. I lost the battle, and stumbled into the bathroom just in time to throw up into the chamber pot.

Rhia dropped to her knees beside me and hesitantly, slowly rubbed my back. *Are you alright?* She asked, her voice laced with worry.

I sucked in a deep breath and pulled myself up. *Fine*, I said. I was not fine. I readied myself and tried for another *to lift*, this time on the desk, larger than anything I'd tried.

I didn't get past striking my hands before the nausea hit me again, harder, everything screaming, and I found myself throwing up again, somehow back in the bathroom.

I sat for the next hour or so with my head in between my knees, trying not to let my brain leak out of my ears as my blood screamed.

What we had learned was this: magic requires intention, magic requires Rhysean. Magic has limits. Magic has consequences.

And what's more, the message was clear: don't over-use magic.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

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Back Again, Back Again: Gold, Part Three

Hey! It's Abigail Eliza. You're about to hear a trailer for the podcast The Children of Room 56 - because, y'all, it's so freakin good. If you're looking to fill the hole in your heart The Magnus Archives left behind or just love queer monster-y media, please give it a listen!! While season one doesn't start until next year, bonus episodes are coming out monthly right now and - I love them so much.

It, much like this show, is available wherever you get your podcasts. I'm gonna shut up now and just let y'all listen to the trailer.

ALEX

Spiritsford is a normal town. Just like yours or mine. It's a nice town. A nice, ordinary town.

It has everything a nice, normal, ordinary town should have. A school. A park. A river. Eyes. Teeth. Feelings.

The town watches. And the town knows. And it decides who gets to stay and who gets to leave.

And Spiritsford has eyes on every wall. Eyes that seem to follow you as you walk down the cobbled street.

You know you are being watched. You know you are being followed. But you carry on with your day. Because, of course, this is just a normal town. And these are all just normal town things. And,

obviously, our townsfolk are normal, too. Just ask the local wizards. They'll tell you themselves that everything going on here is perfectly normal.

And there's nothing strange going on here at all.

[THE MUSIC STOPS]

[CLICK]

SAM

Hello? Is uh, is this thing on? [Sigh.] It was always Chip who did the recordings and I... well, I suppose that's my job now. Now that he's gone. [Beat.] That's... uh... That's the reason I started recording in the first place, actually. [Beat.] Chip Romero is missing. Dead, apparently. [She laughs.] I don't believe that for one second. He's alive and I know it. And I'm going to find him.

[CLICK]

[MUSIC STARTS AGAIN]

ALEX

The Children of Room 56 is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Sharealike 4.0 International License. It is written and directed by Alex Abrahams and edited by Gwyn Grillo, Stoker Leopold, Alin P and Ori Gambardella.

In this trailer, you heard the voices of Alex Abrahams as himself and Tam Silverman as Sam Moss.

You can find us on Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and Tumblr @/room56pod and you can email us at thechildrenofroom56@gmail.com.

Thank you so much for listening. We really appreciate it.

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode nineteen: Gold, part three.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: My headache recessed to a bearable thud as evening came, and as Cassian knocked on my door I pulled myself to my feet, still a little shaky -- like how you feel hours after a battle, after a competition, after strenuous activity: exhausted yet -- wired. Ready for sleep. Ready for round two. I steadied myself as spots danced in front of my eyes for a solid few

seconds, but recovered my sight and met Cassian at the door with a smile.

This time, there was no subtle compliment to our clothing: my dress was the same blue as his, had the same amount of golden accents, was made of a material with the same richness to it. Who we were -- what we represented, together -- who I belonged to: it was on display. It was meant to be shown.

He offered me his arm as we stepped into the hallway, and I hesitated for a second too long before taking it. The events of the previous night flashed starkly in both of our minds, and we froze -- deer in headlights looking at a deer in headlights, problem and spotlight both -- before I coughed and began to tug him along. *There, I thought. Crisis averted. For now.*

Because we'd both had time to reevaluate, as we'd said, and, what's more, daylight had passed by into evening. Logic and reason. Logic and reason -- and -- yet -- my feelings hadn't changed.

There were more important things to tell him first, though. Not because I was a coward. Because I had priorities.

I found my magic, I blurted out, before Cassian could say a word about anything else. He stopped dead.

What?

I found my magic, I repeated. *I can... I can use it. On purpose.*

Cassian broke into a grin. *Ilyaas, that's wonderful. Can you show me?*

Here? I asked. I pursed my lips and thought of my vomiting-and-brain-leakage of the afternoon. My body needed longer to recover than a few hours -- I could feel in my gut that it wouldn't be a good idea to press my luck, not if I wanted to be able to give that speech, look presentable, not cry, not throw up on Cassian's shoes.

He frowned. *Is there something wrong with... here?*

No -- yes -- I rubbed a hand across my face. *I've spent a lot of time doing magic -- the word still gave me a thrill, churned my stomach into excitement -- today, and it had... poor side effects, the longer I used it. I think the same thing'll happen now if I try.*

Cassian nodded. *I see. Are you sure?*

Yes, I snapped, then apologized as he recoiled. Yes. *I'm certain.*

It's okay. Be safe, yes?

I grinned. *Of course. I'll try.*

We began walking again -- he bumped my shoulder with his own, an action we'd done a thousand times before, and I turned my face up to his to laugh only to find that he was -- right there. Looking back down at me. And we were far too close, and it was the middle of the night and we were dancing and -- I

whipped my head back down to stare at my feet, barely visible beneath my dress. My face burned.

Is this okay? What do you want? I wanted to shout, but I was the one that had stepped away. And yet what was it he'd said? *I don't think that was a mistake.*

I suppose I knew what he'd wanted. I supposed I knew what I wanted. It was just a matter of when we'd stop dancing around it and actually spit out the words.

It wasn't on the walk down to the ballroom, though. It wasn't as we swept into the room or as Cassian and I began to talk to the people gathered in the room -- or, as Cassian talked, and translated, and I smiled and pretended to be better at Rhysean than I was, though even that was better than Cassian knew I did. I trotted out my pleasantries and tried not to act shocked the first time English came out of a courtier's mouth. It was nothing: a *hello*, simple, but my ears latched onto it. The more I listened, the more I heard as three phrases fell from the mouths of the people gathered, over and over, in English: Hello. Thank you. My sovereign.

Said like they were meant to impress. Said so eyes flicked to Cassian and I every time they were used, judging our reactions, searching for our -- approval? Contempt? Something.

And they were -- odd, to hear. Heavily Rhysean, vowels rounded. But it was more than that: the last one. *My sovereign*. Directed to me.

It was Odd. Wrong. Because, one, I wasn't. Two, it seemed to imply certain things about relationships and... such... that Cassian and I were currently making a point of avoiding -- but, even then, kissing a pretty boy does not make you ruler of a country.

And three -- that phrase. *My sovereign*. I can't understand how the context for it would arise other than being deliberately introduced as... what? Some sort of linguistic power play? I mean, look at what they knew: to greet -- hello -- to show deference -- thank you -- to give power away -- my sovereign.

At the time, I hadn't noticed the significance of the first two, had simply shocked myself into a stupor over *my sovereign* and the realization that I was still holding Cassian's arm and, gods, we *matched*, what kind of friends did that --

But here -- with nothing else to do but contemplate and speculate and realize all of the things I missed, I've given more weight to those words than they have any right to carry.

I trailed Cassian as he made his circuit -- because who else did I know, with Rhia upstairs? I stood apart, avoided the prying eyes of dignitaries and courtiers when I could, waited for his conversation to cease so I could join him as we moved on. I

was antisocial and grumbly, something better suited to a rogue at the back of a bar in a newbie DnD campaign, but my headache had picked up with my sword upstairs and I very sharply felt its loss. It reduced my patience to near-nothing, so I had even less interest in pretending I didn't notice their stares than usual.

That's when I saw *her*. It took me a moment to place her face, just another among a room of vaguely familiar figures in nice clothes, but --

My heart seized in my chest.

It was the girl from the tavern -- the one Rhia had brought to our table. The one she had played cards and laughed over Traem with. She wore an embroidered dress of lilac purple, a compliment to her warm brown skin. Her hair was braided up and around her face, crown-style -- beautiful, but simpler than that of the cortiers that circled the room.

Cassian's comment that locals from the surrounding villages had been invited as a placificity, a gift, came back to me, along with several rather creative curses. I had told Cassian -- I had told the queen -- that we never made it past the edge of the castle ground. And here was one of the few people in Rhysea that could've confidently disproved that.

Please don't come over here, I thought, shutting my eyes and sending up a prayer to whatever gods of stupid girls existed.

She came over. I thought a few more nasty curses -- and added a couple out loud, after realizing no one would know what they meant.

Hello, she said in English, eyes flicking over me. *My sovereign*. The words were sharp in her mouth, a joke and an insult more than any sort of deference.

They were preferable in that form.

She cocked her head to the side, crossing her arms. In slow, drawn-out Rhysean, she asked me if I'd gotten back from the *Eligidanim Traem* okay.

I opened my mouth and stuttered out a Rhysean response that didn't make sense in my own head, much less to someone who understood its grammatical structure. She grinned.

Cassian materialized at my side, looping one arm through mine. *Are you okay?* He asked, in English, and I nodded, trying to send a message to this girl with my eyes not to say a word. He smiled at the girl, a polite princeling smile.

Her gaze darkened as she took in the way we stood -- close, familiar, Cassian over my shoulder in a way that couldn't be mistaken for anything other than *protective*. The girl gave a half-bow, barely considered polite, and repeated *my sovereign* with a sharp tongue.

Cassian stiffened.

You are from where? I cut in in Rhysean, before everything could fall apart. A default phrase. One of the few I could pull off the top of my head.

She responded, one-word. Cassian's face soured. *Around*, he translated, and asked her something else, but if she ever clarified what she meant in her response -- or let onto the fact that we'd met before -- he never translated.

The girl made an excuse and disappeared back into the crowd. Cassian frowned, sending all his annoyance into one very pointed look at the girl's retreating form, then straightened.

I tried to keep an eye on her as she weaved her way through the crowd, but she was soon swallowed up by the mass of people that crowded round and asked questions, trying to catch a moment with the prince and his soldier as they moved across the floor. Cassian took the time to indulge them, because he always did, answering their questions with his princeling smile, grabbing my hand and squeezing an apology as one man began to talk about me as if I wasn't there. He was going much too fast for Cassian to translate and wasn't making a point of including me in the conversation, anyways, but spent more than enough time staring and mentioning my name.

My title. *Vatakina Eligida*.

There were more interactions, a droning that I did my best to appear polite to as I kept searching for the girl, hoping

with everything in me -- with that tight sort of chest anxiety that makes you feel every one of your ribs -- that she didn't tell the queen. That she didn't mention it to the king -- or to anyone else at the party, for that matter. It could end badly for me -- worse for Rhia.

And then the queen was calling everyone to attention up on her dais. The crowd quieted, turned to face the kings, as Cassian and I drew through the crowd and up to their sides, taking the same places we did at court: I on the right off the king, Cassian on the left off the queen.

Speeches began. I knew I was last up, a treat thrown out to the gathered masses, but that knowledge only churned at my stomach. I knew why, of course, now knowing the exact contents of the letter: you can't announce a competition of monetary and influential gain and expect an audience of people captivated by money and influence to sit still, but I was afraid of forgetting the words or messing up my conjugations or forgetting the pacing that had been drilled into me and reverting, accidentally, in my fevered state, to the rap I'd created to memorize it.

Then it was my turn. I stepped forward, a closing act in a vaudeville show, and began to speak.

My accent was shit, this I know, and it was never more obvious to me than after listening to three people who had been

trained for Rhysean public speaking since birth. I thought through it as I went along.

The speech mentioned the rebels, mentioned the prophecy. Check, check. I introduced the competition to find the poet -- check. The crowd shifted, hissed with murmurs of anticipation, a whispered list of bards to patronize, before falling into less-silent silence as I continued.

The vatika eligida is looking to find her poet. It called Cassian the king and I the soldier, his loyal helper, his weapon. I serve him. I carry the sword from the tree and it is right.

And then -- it was the end. *Rellemom a Rex*. Thank your kings.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of

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Back Again, Back Again: Gold, Part Four

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty: Gold, part four.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I stepped down. The dancing began, then, even as many gathered into groups to discuss what was to come, to make their plans of attack. The chandeliers glowed far above with soft candlelight and a very different sort of anxiety began to appear as Cassian stepped in front of me and offered his hand.

This was not Cassian the princeling, nor Cassius Rex, King of Rhysea. He was only so much a king as I was a soldier. He was a nervous boy in a nice suit, and I could hear the true question in his voice as he asked me to dance.

I accepted, and before I could think beyond the thudding of my heart we were whirling across the floor, the Rhysean sort of

waltz we'd practiced the night before clumsily presenting itself before me.

Back side front side, present-out-behind-out-in, back to repeat, circle, circle, try not to step on Cassian's toes, try not to look all the way up at him, but this is a ballroom, what's he going to do, really? Back side front side, present-out-behind-out-in.

Fool, I thought at myself more than once.

I excused myself after the third song and found myself, without much realizing it, beside the dais where the kings sat. The queen saw me and beckoned me up, so I stood beside her.

Do you need something, Eligida? She didn't look at me as she spoke, eyes still cast out over the crowd. I followed her gaze -- Cassian was dancing with another girl, a dignitary's daughter we'd seen around court. I swallowed and did not feel jealous.

I found my magic, I blurted.

Her expression did not shift. The silence dragged on, moment after moment as I waited for a response. *I can do more, now. Like you wanted.*

And then -- she broke, turned to me and smiled. *I'm so glad.*

I started, taken aback by the smile, the sudden warmth coming from this distant queen. I grinned back, waiting for the *but*.

One didn't come.

You spoke well, earlier.

Thank you, king, I replied, bowing my head. This was a lie, but a kind one -- we all knew how shitty my Rhysean was. *I feel it could have gone better, if I had been given more instructional time. Especially at these events, I fear I never know enough.*

What does it matter? She asked flippantly. *There will always be my son to translate. There's no need for it, not when there are more important things to be done.*

What are you afraid of me knowing? I wanted to ask, but bit my tongue. I'd spent my days in court, learning nothing except how to stay still. Whatever important things were being done, I didn't understand them. *I see, king. But I do wonder --*

What do you think of my son? She cut in coolly.

I swallowed. *Your son?* Said like a question. As if there was any question to whom she was referring.

Cassius Rex. What do you think of him?

I think he's -- I hesitated. My brain kept going, even as my tongue faltered. *I think he's -- impossible. To sum up. Even after all of it, even after the fallout and the change -- even*

years later, I find myself short-circuiting trying to encapsulate everything he is. Was. Even months after leaving Rhysea, spending all of my time trying to figure out how to put these strange and beautiful people into words, I don't know how to describe all the little things that I think about when I remember them. Cassian was slowing down to match your pace and crowns and curly hair and the sound of his breathing as I laid on his chest. He was swords embossed with destiny and worries about his place in the world. He was his mother when she told him to be. He was more than that -- and he was less than that -- and he was things we haven't reached yet.

I think he's -- good. I think he tries to be good.

She nodded, slowly. The song ended, and Cassian scanned the room, his eyes meeting mine. He mouthed, dramatically, *a rescue?*

You spend much time with him.

I don't know very many other people, king. But that wasn't all true. I would've picked him out of a room of people to pass an evening with.

She paused. *Are you unhappy?*

No. No, king. No, I was never unhappy in Rhysea, no matter what was going on. Because a world with magic was always better than what I'd left behind. *I just -- it was an observation. My options of communication are limited, as I only know English, and they only know Rhysean.* It was a jab, and we both knew it.

She let it slide. *My son cares for you, Eligida.*

I -- I see.

You should ensure he has not misplaced his affections. She cleared her throat. *I know you do not agree with my choices, Eligida, but I ask you to abide by them. I work towards the same ends as you and my son do.*

Cassian climbed the dais. The dancing continued, my conversation with the queen over and done.

I searched for the girl in lavender, as Cassian took my hand and led me down to the floor. I let my eyes cast out for her as we danced, as the rows shifted and partners changed and I was standing across from the boy who always waited after court for the room to clear.

She was nowhere that I could see. It turned out -- as I discovered, much later on in the journey, that she was visiting Rhia, had snuck up to our room and spent as much time as she could safely manage with her.

The dancing ended, and the girl appeared once more. She approached me, again, but this time Cassian was glued to my arm and the expression she wore made me want to keep him beside me, a measure of protection, a measure of comfort.

I'll be seeing you again, she said in Rhysean, sweeping into a sarcastic sort of bow. *My sovereign.*

Cassian cursed under his breath as she walked away. *Like hells you will. Guards?* He asked. They snapped to attention, as they always did around him, and as he called them by name they nodded. *Don't let her back in again.*

Sic, my sovereign.

Cassian turned to me.

Listen, he said, his face alight with an intensity somewhere between excitement and anger. The girl rattled him, for reasons I couldn't tell you, listener. I don't know them myself. *There's to be another raid in a few days. You should come with us. Show the world all you can do, now.*

I thought we said no more raids, I replied apprehensively, reaching up to where my scar ran along my shoulder. Bile rose in the back of my throat at the thought of another battle. I'd had enough of throwing up for the day. I didn't need more. *That I'd just get killed if I went.*

That was before magic. Now you're safe.

Safe as what? I scoffed.

Safe as anyone, in a war.

Cassian, I don't think --

Ilyaas - his voice was firm. *I promise. You will be okay.*

My stomach churned - that was not a promise anyone could make for a battlefield - but I agreed.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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Back Again, Back Again: In-Betweens

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty one: In-between.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: How can I have been so stupid, right? *They're not right, you say. Cassian and the kings -- there's something off about them. Why won't they let you learn? Why won't they let you leave? How did you not notice how much they were leaving you out of in order to further their own plans?*

And I'll tell you. I wanted to be special. Gods above, I wanted to be special. My entire life, I'd stuffed my head full of stories about girls who get carried away on fantastical adventures where they became heroes and I'd believed that I'd never get my - that - chance.

And then I did. I woke up in a different world where they told me I was great and could change everything and so yes, I

believed them. I wanted to believe that what I was doing was right, so I didn't hesitate. I raised up my sword and blocked out everything not-quite-right because *here it was, my chance at everything, I am the chosen one, the prophecy child, why would I waste that chance?*

I was selfish. And people died because of it. Because of me.

But. Forgive me if I don't want to linger on my own shortcomings for too long. I promise that I wise up soon enough. It comes with consequence, but I do stop acting so goddamn stupid.

A few days after the speeches, Cassian and I found ourselves sparring in the arena, back to our morning routines. Part of this time had become devoted to learning about my magic -- though Cassian wasn't nearly as gentle about it as Rhia had been, as she always was. The first time showing it to him, green-gold glow, wind pushing him back, his eyes had gone alight. He'd spent the rest of the morning pushing at my abilities, seeing how far they could go. I'd suffered through court with a splitting headache and fell asleep right after dinner, exhausted, but he'd been right -- I'd known more at the end of the day than I had at the beginning of it.

And, of course, there was a different kind of power that came from seeming strong. After spending weeks getting thrashed

by the soldiers in Cassian's company in whatever group exercises I'd been forced to participate in, it was -- satisfying? To prove that I wasn't worthless. To prove that I at least vaguely understood what I was capable of. That *I* could be a threat.

There were three days until our next raid, and the nervous energy was beginning to build in the air. I'd seen it enough times -- even when I wasn't tagging along. There was a frantic determination to the soldier's movements, a harriedness and a twinge of fear that wasn't there before they'd gotten their mission instructions. It's fun to play with swords until you're told to kill. It's fun to play at battle until you're watching people die and narrowly avoiding it yourself.

It was in these days -- where I practiced matching my magic with my sword-fighting, trying to strengthen every last skill I could in order to not die, in order to not be a liability -- that the prophecy was brought up by one of the soldiers. He'd yelled something towards Cassian and I, a passing joke that had something to do with the soldier-poet-king. Cassian had grimaced but traded responses until I asked, *what is he saying?*

The soldier had laughed, little English girl with no idea, and turned away. Cassian turned back towards me, squared his footing, found his center, and raised his sword. I mimicked him.

It's nothing nice, Ilyaas. Let it be.

My ears burned. I hated not knowing Rhysean. I hated that insinuation, *it's nothing nice about you*, and the fact that I had no way of retorting, of even *knowing what was happening*, without the permission of someone else. I tightened my grip on my sword. *Tell me.*

Cassian sighed. *He says that the stories never say anything about the Eligida losing more fights than she'd ever won.*

It was nothing I hadn't thought myself, but it still stung coming from someone else. Part of me wanted to curse the soldier out, a delayed reaction to an explained dig. Part of me knew that would be worse, just proving that I couldn't fight my own battles.

Logic won out. I lunged for Cassian. At least I could turn my anger into something productive. *What story says that? It wasn't in the prophecy you gave me.* The no-fear Rhysean prophecy he'd delivered my first week here, English and Rhysean lines matched up to each other.

Cassian parried, no problem, his sword sliding against mine and striking into the guard. I winced at the force and whispered *peril anil*, my sword glowing as Cassian's blade was thrown from mine, and he stumbled back several feet.

Peril anil: literally, go back, go to the past.

No magic this time, he said. *Merit or nothing.*

There's merit in magic. I retorted. *You still haven't told me what story says the Eligida can fight.*

Cassian came in for a second round, his sword flashing. *There's... a whole book. A lot of it is lost -- it's the book from which we learn English, but passages were forgotten to be passed down. There are some stories from there the people know - or have created on their own, over the years. That is one of them. That is part of the legend of the -- of you.*

I tried to disarm him, failed, and took several steps backwards, out of swinging range. *I could read it. I could tell you what the lost bits say.*

He moved into my guard, fast and fierce, and the next moments were the flashing of blades and the pounding thought of *oh shit* through my head that I still hadn't learned how to shake during a fight.

He disarmed me. My sword went skittering across the sand, and I cursed.

You're not a very good soldier, he joked, raising his sword to my chin, and I snarled as I batted it aside with my bracer and stomped over to pick up my sword. It was a riff of the soldier's joke, but it stung less, coming from him.

Well, maybe I'm just meant to be king, then.

Cassian stopped, sword lowered, face set. *That is not how the story goes.*

Really? I asked, egging him on now that he'd turned my joke into what sounded like the beginnings of a lecture. *How should I know, if I haven't read all of it? How do you know, if you haven't either?*

He hadn't moved. *This isn't the place for this conversation.*

I was getting mad, now, becoming unnecessarily petty. I was tired of losing sword fights and being incompetent and being left in the dark on things that affected me. I raised my voice. *Who's going to know? Who here knows English, besides you and me?*

He raised his sword. I did mine, too, itching for a fight. *How do you know you're king?* I asked. *How do you know? Did your book tell you? Or did you just assume you were meant for greatness?*

He blocked my blow. *Because I come from a family of kings,* he snapped. *They all ruled before me. I will rule after them.*

Rhia's words. *Maybe you were meant to be king.*

I parried his counterattack, thanking my increasingly fast reflexes for avoiding injury. Cassian still was not going full-out, I knew this. But even being able to keep up with him at half-pace was an accomplishment in itself. *But isn't the word for "king" in Rhysean genderless? "Queen" is an English word, listener. There's no true Rhysean equivalent, no word for "female ruler" or "male ruler." Only Rex. Only King.*

His next blow came quicker, and my sword was once again knocked out of my hands. I cursed, loudly.

Fine, I said. *You're the king*. Like this was a children's game and we were deciding what roles to play. *But I'm still a shit soldier for you to put this much hope into*.

He raked a hand through his hair. His breath left his chest in a long, shaky exhale I found myself matching, even as we both sat in our annoyance. *Can we go for a walk? I need air*.

I sheathed my sword and went with him, not saying a word. We walked until we ended up in the garden, underneath the enarbol, where he sat, plunking himself against it with no small amount of force.

I sat beside him and tilted my head back against the bark. Coppery-veined leaves rustled above my head, and I tried to let the last of my anger go.

Why can't I know everything? Why aren't I learning Rhysean?

Cassian opened his mouth, but I cut him off. *Don't say there's no point. Don't say that you'll just tell me if I need to know. I've gotten enough of that from your mother. Don't do it, too*.

Then I won't. He paused. *But there is... there is some truth to what she says, about how much time it would take. There is too much else to be done, Ilyaas. It took me hours of practice a day for years to learn the language of the book*.

That is how learning a language works, I muttered. *You didn't really answer my question.*

He sighed and knocked the back of his head against the tree, muttering something in Rhysean. I rolled my eyes. *If you'd bothered to teach me something other than how to get my ass handed to me in a fight, I might know what you just said.*

Ilyaas, he sighed.

Cassian, I mimicked.

Neither of us said anything for a long moment. I knew by his closed eyes and the way he was breathing -- slowly, deliberately -- that he was counting his breaths, trying to organize his thoughts.

There are people who would whisper wrong into your ears. There are rebels that would take every chance to turn you to their side, and language is a large part of it.

Cassian, you know me.

And I'm afraid that someday I will look at you and not know who you've become.

This wasn't a real answer. This was problematic in a thousand ways, but I wanted him to be telling the truth, to have honest intentions. But how many times in history has information been withheld for a reason other than to manipulate a narrative?

He opened his eyes again, fingers skimming over the tiny wildflowers -- the *frets-flors*. *Savastreflors*.

How about -- he said, then cleared his throat. What if we had lists for you to learn? Helpful words. To center yourself.

I bit the inside of my cheek.

Things I would say, now: For how long? If I'm to be a soldier forever, how long until I learn how to command the people I'm meant to lead? What about after the war? What purpose do I serve, then, without language?

Things I said, then: That would be nice.

The competition, he said, to find the poet. Can we talk about that?

I don't know much about it. In the context of our conversation, it was more of a jab than I had meant it, so I continued. But tell me?

Three day's worth of competition, he began. But a festival, a week-long -- and that's just the part that we are in charge of. Taverns will fill up long before, everyone coming to stake out a spot. Much of the court has already begun to patronize the bards of Rhysea.

Can only those with sponsors join?

No, he said, it's free to all. But the reward helps to motivate the search, it seems. Sending out riders with a call is less effective than giving noblemen a chance at more riches.

And then what will happen? I asked.

*A lot of feasts, he said. You'll lose your mind, I think.
It's a struggle not to. I hate the damned things.*

Ah, yes, large meals. The scourge of us all. I joked.

You'll see, he promised. Just wait.

And how will the bard be chosen, exactly?

*Songs. They'll sing before the two of us and the kings --
and we'll choose, from there. It will be outside -- in a -- he
fumbled. I don't know the word. It will be outside -- so
everyone can watch. There will be lots of seating and anyone can
come to see the stories unfold.*

Like an amphitheater? I asked.

He repeated the word, slowly. If that is what you call it.

*What if the true poet doesn't come? What if they don't hear
the message?*

Everyone will come. Have faith, Ilyaas.

Everyone? That'll be a lot of people.

*Everyone wants to play at greatness, He said. Only few can
achieve it.*

What about you, Cassius Rex?

*He smiled softly, tilting his head so he was looking into
my eyes. You and I are meant for more than mere greatness.*

I'd laughed, at the time, trying not to flush. Right.

*He stood, brushing off his pants, then offered me a hand.
We've wasted enough practice time. Up. He unsheathed his sword*

and took several steps backwards. *Stop staying on the defensive. You will never win if you remain too afraid to attack.* He swung his sword back and forth as I rose and unsheathed my own. My blood hummed, my sword beginning to glow, before he continued, *No magic. Only merit.*

I rolled my eyes. *Scared?*

Of course not. You should be prepared.

Fine, I said. *I'll still whoop your ass.*

We both knew this was highly unlikely. We readied ourselves anyway.

I swung first, before he'd had a chance to furrow his brow and pinpoint all my weak spots. Unfortunately, I hadn't concentrated first, either, and my aim was off, crashing down his left side. His blade slid past mine and caused me to stumble past; I whirled around, ready for his follow-up attack.

Cassian stood, watching me. *Attack, Ilyaas.*

I did, again, this time with a modicum of more aim. I came at him with a series of blows in rapid succession, a back-and-forth he matched until he parried out instead of just blocking, and I once again stumbled past, annoyance building in my chest when he once more didn't bother to follow up.

Fine, I thought. *Fine.*

Blood roaring in my ears, I lunged towards Cassian, throwing everything into my hits. As he went to pull the same

trick -- to parry out to disarm me, I caught his blade against the guard of mine and thrust forward, sending him stumbling backwards. I threw out my hand and snapped *peril anil* before he could do a thing, and Cassian flew backwards, landing hard on his ass.

His expression darkened for just a second, a shock of the ground, before he tossed a smirk up to me. *Cheater*, he called good-naturedly, and accepted the hand I'd extended. I pulled him to his feet.

And -- he was so close, dark eyes and crooked smile that suddenly faded, faded away. He still hadn't let go of my hand.

I told you, he breathed. *You and I. We're meant for more than just greatness.*

I'm still a shit soldier -- I started to say, and then --
He kissed me.

And... I was kissing him.

We broke away a breath later. Cassian laced his hand through mine.

His eyebrows quirked. *Are you okay?*

Yeah. Yes. Are you?

Kiss me again and I'll let you know, he said, so I did, blushing like a fool as his other hand skimmed, feather-light, over my cheek.

The taverns will be full for weeks before the festival,
Cassian said. *We should visit.*

I swallowed, tried to steady my voice. *Yeah. Yes. that*
would be nice.

He smiled and stepped away, picking up his sword. *I have to*
go. Meetings.

Have fun, I said, a fool, and watched as he left, still
completely freaking dumbstruck.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales"
once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written
and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more
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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Back Again, Back Again: Soldier

Abigail: Hello hello, it's Abigail Eliza here with a quick little speal before today's episode. Um, the pod recently got a discord server - which is *really* exciting - which you can find in the episode description if you'd like to hang out with other folks who are very, very into The Oh Hellos, Narnia, and generally anything comforting and queer and fantasy-themed. We do also talk about the show there. It's a good time.

And recently in the server, Jupiter, Sparrow, Rachel, and Nat all made some absolutely FANTASTIC Back Again, Back Again-themed playlists which SLAP - so I wanted to give them a quick shout-out!! I've spent far too much time listening to them recently - so thank y'all so much for your impeccable music taste!!

And - onto today's episode!!

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty two: Soldier.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I hate talking about kissing Cassius Rex. I hate talking about kissing. I feel like I should have ended the last entry with that.

But -- I didn't. So. Disclaimer.

Not that it's helping my case, but I couldn't stop thinking about our -- kiss. Kisses. Kissing. Maybe if I just say the word *kiss* enough times, it'll lose all meaning and I'll stop sitting here flushed red because of the sheer amount of times I've said it.

Kiss. Kiss. Kiss. It's not helping. God, I think it's making it worse.

I -- I'll stop. This is awful.

Days passed. We continued like normal, like friends, largely like it had never happened. Mornings were spent sparring and afternoons preparing, *preparing*, because we would ride out at the end of the week for another raid, this one a full day's march away. My anxiety crept up. I woke up, shaky, heart racing and eyes wet, from nightmares where I died or Cassian did -- or Cassian was killing people, faceless people, and then was trying to kiss me with blood all over his face -- Rhia died, or Rhia

killed, or I killed, and the *slunk* of a blade sliding in sounded just the way it had when I'd gotten stabbed.

It -- god, it messed with my head. Do you know when you dream about someone and you can't quite look them in the eye the next day? It was that, but worse, and I --

They're not good dreams to have. They're not good to remember, either.

It was the morning of the raid, and Rhia handed me a list of words Cassian had sent the day before. We'd spent the evening practicing them -- I'd begged her to stay up late with me and she'd insisted I needed to rest until a concession was made, a middle ground where we lay down beside each other and sang songs she'd taught me until she fell asleep.

So you can look over them while you're away, she explained as I folded the list into my pocket. *Away*. A gentle word. Her eyes told me she knew what my nights had been, and I was thankful she didn't say anything more.

I thanked her for the words and presented her the shitty drawings I'd done the night before, while she was asleep and I couldn't, of us on the roof -- stick figures labeled with our names and a billion stars staining the sky -- the best I could do at a gift. *So you don't miss me while I'm gone*, I joked, before she crushed me into a hug. I squeezed her tight, burying my head in her shoulder.

Thank you, I whispered. Gratinoc. For everything.

Be safe, she said. Promise me you'll be safe.

Rhia, I can't --

Promise me you'll come back.

I made a promise I couldn't be certain I'd keep and squeezed her hand one last time before heading out.

I met Cassian in the arena, as he and his soldiers checked bags and weapons and horses and shouted at each other to be heard over the din of Rhysean. I was wearing my armor and had my sword by my side, a small comfort, and as he saw me he pulled from his pocket a small jar of golden paint.

We don't fight today, I said.

It's for luck, he replied, so I held still as he dragged it down my left cheek and across the right side of my forehead, two lines each, then copied it onto his.

Just for a moment, I remembered the blood from my dreams, smeared across his face in the same way. I shut down the thought before my heart rate kicked up.

Gratinoc, I said, as he sealed the jar back away. He brightened at my Rhysean.

Do you have the list I sent? He asked, and I nodded. They were all battle words, command words, except for one that was both not-quite and also very-much-so:

The word for *dead*. Which, in Rhysean, can just as easily mean *lost*.

pertus.

The company was larger than last time -- forty or fifty soldiers, all in armor. Most would be on foot -- we had time, the village was a day's walk away and Cassian wanted us all well-rested before the next morning's battle. He gave orders in his princeling voice, a sharp-edged, booming Rhysean, as I stood to his side in my armor and paint, trying not to let my fear show.

We rode out. Cassian and I were both mounted, along with the captain of the guard and a few battalion leaders Cassian drafted his legion from -- Hildegarde, the captain of the guard, rode beside us, Cassian in the middle, I on the left and her on the right. They were an older soldier -- older than us, anyways, not a very accomplished feat, but one that made our youth all the more stark. Hildegarde was maybe in her late thirties and had the body of a soldier, muscled and able, and airs of experience that even Cassian didn't give off. They sat in their saddle like it was a throne, their tawny hands loose in the reins. Cassian talked with her in Rhysean as we made our way along, the two of them falling into old banter.

They taught me to fight, he explained. *And I was explaining that I've been teaching you in turn*. He laughed as Hildegarde

said something else, voice gruff. *She says that you would be better off learning from her* -- he switched back to Rhysean, a jab that began with *but I say that*, the rest lost in translation. The two of them snipped back and forth with each other, laughing.

Eligida, I finally heard, and snapped back into the conversation. Hildegarde stared at me, not unkindly, awaiting a response.

She repeated herself at my blank stare, slow Rhysean that I managed to pick apart - something like, *Your magic, Eligida?*

They waved a hand around.

They want a demonstration, Cassian supplied, and I started.

Oh. Oh, okay. I fumbled with my grip on the reins so I could strike my hands together and murmured *vienil*, sending wind shaking through the tops of the trees, picking up the leaf rot from years past and sending it skittering around the feet of the soldiers. I pushed at it until my ears rang, the trees shaking as I tried to expand my focus beyond the small areas I'd practiced.

Hildegarde nodded, sated. Maybe it was impressed. I couldn't say. Cassian grinned at me, though, and mouthed a *thank you*. I smiled back.

It wasn't until the sun was beginning to fall that we stopped to set camp. The battalion was maybe an hour's walk away

from our target, close enough to ensure the soldiers weren't exhausted come battle, far enough to give warning from scouts if the rebels found us and launched their own attack. I stood off to the side, awkwardly, as the soldiers assembled camp, setting up fires and tying up the horses and bringing out blankets and bedrolls. Tents, apparently, were something of a taboo for these short little trips. The *why* was explained much later -- why we sleep under-the-stars when we're on long journeys -- but it wasn't by Cassian.

I won't make you wait for that part of the story for the *why*, dear listener. See, first, of course, it's lighter. No tents mean less weight, and when you're marching on foot, that's important.

Second, tents are a sign of permanence -- if you're putting up tents, you're there for the long haul -- for more than a simple passing-through. If that's not your intention, it can be a bad omen -- a jinx, I guess, is a better word. There's a word in Rhysean that's a combination of the two: *augerton*. It's like... a warning that you're jinxing yourself. If you set up a permanent camp without the intention of permanence, you're daring fate to make it so you can't leave.

Plus, as I was also told, the stars are always more brilliant while on an adventure.

By the time the sky had gone fully dark, campfires roared and the crew had drug logs and rocks around to sit on, booming stories or hurtling insults across the fires. Cassian and I sat by each other, surrounded by his soldier-friends, all eating the bread and dried meat we'd brought and not minding the shitty taste because the air smelled like adventure and promise and even though it was loud and still foreign, something I'd never done before, it was easy to see the allure, the camaraderie. When they started singing, starting at marching songs and tilting into ballads, they all laughed and made exaggerated notions of surprise as there came some I knew, learned from Cassian, learned from Rhia, and I added my shitty voice to the mix.

They all talked circles around me as the night wore on -- the fast sniping of people who had grown up together. In the firelight and dark, Cassian was indistinguishable from the rest of them, no more a prince than anyone sitting opposite. His voice had lost the king's lilt he kept around his parents, the court, the one he'd told me a tutor drilled into him after I'd joked about it. There was an ease to his shoulders you were hard-pressed to find in him at the castle, and from the way he sniped back, just as passionately as anyone else, they didn't see him a king, aloof and separate, as much as a friend, someone

who'd earned his place, someone who they'd follow not out of duty but soul-deep loyalty.

No one said much to me -- or, at least, I didn't catch mention of my name among the mix. In passing, I joked to Cassian about this -- something stupid, I can't even recall what my comment had been -- but his response, meant to be another joke, was delivered a little bit ingenuinely all the same: *they must just be scared of you, Vatakina Eligida, or worry that you will curse them.*

Vatakina Eligida. Meant to poke fun at my title, but there was something still so -- odd -- about it coming from his mouth. I was always Ilyaas to him.

And then, later, I heard *Eligida* again, but not from Cassian's mouth -- another soldier's, who sat across the fire: the words were fragmented, as they always were when I tried to follow along, but I could hear enough that sparked that insidious doubt back into my heart.

The words were *Eligida* and *vikina* and *allemim a ilms*. *Prophecy girl* and *orders* and *we -- not you -- can't talk to her*, and they were tossed to Cassian, just another joke among the many of the night.

It was phrased like a question, said like a joke. But Cassian turned slightly red in the firelight as the soldier said it. He very deliberately did not look at me as he shot back a

curt response and shoved half a roll into his mouth, the air suddenly growing thick and cold.

I don't know if he was being deliberately difficult, but I hadn't known any of the words in his response.

But no matter how you phrased it, the meaning was the same. *Why did you order us not to talk to the prophecy girl? Why are the orders to not talk to the Eligida?*

Was he that afraid of what I could learn in three conversations and a drinking song? Or was he afraid of the prerequisite it would set?

And... doubt comes in. That something wasn't right with him. With this whole thing.

And that doubt? It doesn't leave.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Abigail: Hello hello! This is Abigail popping in to say that Back Again, Back Again now has a Ko-Fi! If you're enjoying the show and would like to support its creation, consider stopping off at ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast to buy me a coffee! Not only will you be thanked in the next episode, but if you leave me an arguably pg-13 topic in the comment box, I'll write you an absolutely ridiculous little limerick about it to read out on the show, too. I can't promise that it will be, like, top-tier poetry, but it'll be silly!

And if that's not your vibe, or you can't donate - oh my god! No problem at all! I'm just so happy that you took the time to listen to the show!!

I hope you have a wonderful day! Onto the episode!

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty three: Soldier, Part two.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I don't want to talk for long about the battle. We went to bed and got up and marched towards the rebel camp as the sun woke up. I rode on a white horse, a harbinger from a story, and death-gripped the reins, never comfortable in this role. My sword hummed at my side -- I could feel the magic in the trees all around me. The forests of Rhysea are distinctly magical -- everything is in balance. They all grow and die and feed the things after them, trees give shelter and birds give belonging and thousands of tiny ants march along, drawing patterns too small for us to see and too big to ever truly realize. It's peace and calm and it's like... finding loose change and the rattling in your car finally stopping. It's the absolute relief that silence brings.

It didn't calm me as much as it usually did -- I was too jumpy to find much solace in anything, no matter how much it reached for me.

The rebels were packing when we reached them. All of them were armed. They'd learned we were coming, it seemed, and they'd wanted to outrun us. Not to stay and fight.

We stayed and fought. I didn't disappear anyone, but -- I killed more than one person. Because they were trying to kill me. Because I feared they would. Because getting stabbed hurt and I didn't want it to happen again.

Because none of them were very well trained, these people, and they were easy to make fall.

I did what Cassian said to, among all of it. I used my magic and made some sort of display, but more than anything, my sword glowed -- maybe *glowered* is the right word -- and I watched as their faces drained of color before they were cut open.

The rebels did not run ahead and run away. We killed them and burned their bodies and three ran off into the woods and *let them go*, Cassian said, *so everyone knows who we have on our side*.

I did get hurt. Cut across the leg real deep. I think he was trying to gut my horse.

Victory is a lot less exciting when you see how it's done.

We marched through the town we sheltered outside the night before, and the silence within was so absolute that you could almost hear the thrum of the trees. Solemn. Not unhappy faces -- because this village had been dangerously close to sheltering rebels -- they had to have known -- but they weren't foolish. They just lacked... everything. Allegiance or anguish or animosity. They mostly lacked anger - an absence so profound it had to be deliberate. One girl didn't hide it from her face, the hatred, and her sister stepped in front of her as I passed by.

They knew what we had done. But they'd just seen what happens to those who don't bow.

And yet they all still bowed -- bowed for the prince, bowed for the Vatakina Eligida. Because we were their sovereign. Because we were an army marching through their town and the sounds of slaughter carry on the wind. Several of them made the sign the woman did, at the house where I first got taken to the castle -- *shoulder shoulder out press* -- and in this I could see their hatred. Their hurt. Their -- hope.

Hatred because of who I fought with. Hurt because of who I rode with. Hope that it would change and *there will come a soldier who will tear your city down.*

They looked to me to fix something I was only starting to comprehend. And I made a promise, deep inside my head.

I will, I said, I will try fix these things.

In the village center, Cassian and I dismounted. The village head, an old woman faded by the years, crowned us in golden laurels and flowers in shades of sunrise and gloaming. She was as expressionless as the rest of them as she placed the wreath upon my head -- but her eyes flashed for just a moment as she tilted my chin up to meet hers. And there it was - the force of will. The need to do right by these people. For them to have the chance to choose their own destinies.

I felt the magic spark into her palm. I watched her eyes glow, for just a second, some deep magic reawakened, before I got back on my horse and nodded -- all I could do in the moment.

But I brought it up three times to Cassian on the ride back -- because I still believed in his good. Cassian -- *later* -- Cassian it's important -- *later* -- Cassian -- *when we're alone*. And when we were alone: *when we can't be overheard*. Which I knew wouldn't be until we got back to the palace, and that even then privacy was a foregone thing. And I feared I would lose my resolve in the face of the kings and their thrones and the weight of expectation. Of being wanted. But that was why I was there, yes? To change things? I thought. To make things right.

We marched through the night, and as we arrived back into the arena, as the gates swing open and the soldiers flooded inside, to rest, to mourn for those lost -- eight lost, another four wounded so horribly they were left behind at the village to heal. Three stayed to watch over them, all wildly aware of the animosity around them and the target they now were, without the backings of an army.

Cassian hesitated outside the gateway, horse pulled to the side. I knew neither of us looked anything better than *haggard* at the moment, twenty-four hours out of sleep, but he hadn't become the princeling quite yet, his demeanor still changed.

I stopped beside him, fidgeting with the reins. Are you okay?

He grimaced. *There's still one other thing I have to do. Ilyaas, come with me?*

Of course, I said on instinct, and followed him out, down the roads into the villages that surrounded the castle. *What are we doing?* I asked, and only then did I notice the bundle strung across his back -- eight swords. Eight swords for the eight dead.

Oh, I realized, and didn't ask him to explain as we dismounted in front of a small house, flowers in the windows and laundry lines tied between it and the shed, as he knocked on the door, as I watched a mother's face break with a sort of anguish I could never truly describe.

Cassian hugged her as she clutched at him, and even with my shitty ears, with my shitty Rhysean, I could hear *why, why, why*.

A younger sister, all of six, seemed to realize what was happening. Cassian murmured his condolences and promised something I didn't have the words for as she sobbed, and as they looked to me -- searching for -- something, I pieced together a sentence from the nothing I had.

Sentinoc quera. Ilms seans fret.

I... feel sorry. She is brave.

Is instead of was. I didn't know the past tense -- it wasn't something that had been taught to me yet among key words and formal greetings and verbs of the now. *I am blessed. They are coming. He is the king.* And the way the mother looked at me -- as that is instead of was, at that small bit of hope. And the way the little sister, no more than six, how her head turned. How her eyes went wide -- because she hadn't quite understood death, and this was hope -- that marked the precise moment I realized my mistake.

I knew the word for *magic* when it came out of the girl's mouth.

And I knew the word for *dead* when it came out of Cassian's.

Cassian gave the mother the soldier's locket and the sister the girl's sword and taught me the word for *was* the second we left the house. *Seans* to *sians*. *Ilms sians fret*.

Back at the palace, seven houses later. Riding through and seeing celebration with *Ilms seans-sians fret* running through my mind and an already long-healed scar on my leg. I don't remember getting off my horse or walking up to my room but I do remember Rhia crushing me into a hug as I slowly explained everything to her.

She explained the gesture to me, finally. *Shoulder-shoulder out-cross*. All the things it means -- a long history, not the

abbreviated version Cassian had told me that first day after court. Then she promised to make me a list of past-tense verbs.

And when I told her of Cassian's later-later-later and the way the village looked at me to save them all -- from what? From what? From the people I rode with, I started to realize, she promised to tell me the truth. To tell me the *everything* I wasn't supposed to know.

It starts with the prophecy, she said, and ends with a death. But there's a lot in between. And there's a lot that I don't know.

Tell me anyways, I said. Tell me everything you know.

I will, she promised. Tomorrow night. There were bars on my windows now, still, but like Cassian had said -- *find somewhere where no one's listening* -- she promised to find a place, too.

But there's -- there's one more thing I should explain, before I go. Because here, everything gets set into motion.

Here -- picture the scene. It's dinner. You sit with two kings and a prince. You're starting to suspect they're the tyrants and not the saviors. You're starting to doubt a lot of things and have a promise to keep with people you never spoke words to and you have a promise to keep to a girl who's finding a place safe enough to tell the secrets of the world. And you're not thinking about dinner, or the prince, or the kings, because of promises you made.

This is when the queen says, *I've been thinking about matrimony.*

Oh? You say, casually, suddenly no longer so preoccupied. The king has left since you last looked up, off to indulge in the fruit or flesh or just to take a really long nap. You suddenly feel awfully cornered, even though you hadn't spoken much to the king since the day you pulled the sword from the tree, but his impartialisms made him seem a friendly party at this table. *Your own, or just generally?*

Cassian's, she responds, in the same sort of tone you pulled your *oh?* From. That is, from your ass. Cassian is red, you see, when you sneak a headlong glance at him, but not red enough that this is new to him.

Oh, you say again, because now there is no doubt where this is going.

Do you know how to politely refuse a power grab in the form of a marriage proposal given not by the bridegroom but by his mother? You get up from the table and walk out. Just set your napkin in its place and go back up to your room.

And then you ignore Cassian when he pounds on the door of your room and asks to explain. And you focus on the doorhandle and you push at it with your magic and say the nice little words so it glows with heat, so then when he tries to grab it to come in anyways he curses and asks again instead of forces.

You sit in your room and you try not to think.

And the next day, when the queen announces the engagement before the court as you stand at her shoulder and Cassian comes around to your other, you pretend like you'd known all along. Like there was consent given.

Because these people don't know the English words for *this isn't the truth*. And you don't know how to say them in Rhysean, either. So you wait for Rhia to tell you everything she knows and you start planning how to get away.

This is where the story begins. It starts with a prophecy and a girl with lion hair almost being run over by a cart, but the day the promises were made and false ones were created and a girl whispered to the eligida *this is all that I know* was when it truly began.

You'll hear everything soon. The story, the prophecy, the engagement and the words exchanged and the lot of it. I need to get my thoughts in order before then.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Episode 24: Everything I Know

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty four: Everything I Know.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: *It starts with a prophecy, Rhia said, and ends with a death. It starts with a promise and a spark of magic and ends with balance and peace hard-fought. It ends with stubbornness and forgiveness and two souls from somewhere far away. And that is all I know.*

Of everything? I asked. We sat on the roof, one we'd climbed to through a library window so far back into the maze of books it would take ages for anyone to reach us and had taken ages to find in the first place. The night air was cold with the dregs of the winter - spring would come soon, it would, but even that promise wasn't met with the same desperation as anywhere else. Rhysea never got cold like it did here - but I shivered.

Rhia's hair blew, long and wispy, around her face. The stars glittered in strange constellations I hadn't the names for. It's peculiar, to see the sky above you so different from anything you've known. But they're the stars. No matter to where they belong, there is always some comfort in the stars.

No, she said. Just of the prophecy.

There will be a soldier poet king, I reminded her, tentative and slow. *What about them?*

They will be there. She said. And one of them will die.

Which one am I? I asked.

I don't know, she said. *Not for certain.*

But we both had our suspicions.

Who are the others?

I don't know, she said. *But I wonder.*

And - silence. *Which one of them will die?*

She sat, quiet. *I - don't know. At all.*

We sat in the dark and the starlight and waited until it felt a little less dangerous to keep talking.

How do I find them? I asked. *The soldier-poet-king?*

And this time she had a somewhat-answer.

You acknowledge your wrongs. You make the hard choices.

She paused. *And you run.*

My heart began to thud. As if she'd read my thoughts. As if that hadn't been the thing that I'd been toying with, daring to think, in the very corners of my mind. *The prophecy says to run?*

The prophecy doesn't, she told me, wrapping her arms around her legs. *But I do.*

Why?

Let me tell you everything I know, she said, and all the stories forbidden by kings came pouring out.

Long ago magic was everywhere. Long ago the magic started to die along with the trees and the forest and the hope of the people. Long ago a king came and cut the forest down, and left the last great tree standing in his garden, for a witch told him if he cut it down it would mean the end of his line. In the tree was a sword.

My sword, I said, a statement as a question I already knew the answer to. It hummed to me, as it always did, usually strapped to my waist now laid beside me on the roof.

Your sword, she answered.

There used to be witches?

There used to be more people like you. And those who were afraid called them witches. Now those who are afraid call you eligida.

And what do I call them? I asked.

She smirked. *Court. Cassian. Queen.*

Cassian isn't afraid of me, I retorted. He was smiles and golden light and curly hair and he tried to do right even if it was confusing and didn't always feel like it turned out that way, he was following the orders of his mother and father and hadn't been raised to know how to do anything else. If all of this was wrong and he was a tyrant it was because the people around him had molded him into such, but he could be changed, and I tried to explain all of this to her. *He's not afraid of me.*

He's afraid of who he would be if he wasn't king, she said, calmly. *He's afraid of what it would mean if he wasn't a part of the prophecy.*

I'd still love him, I said defensively.

She paused. *You love him?*

No, I said, because it was true. Yes, I said, because it was also true. *I love the good he's trying to be. Not romantically. (Maybe romantically, I didn't say out loud. But if so, maybe less now).* I cleared those thoughts from my head and continued my half-lie. *I don't know enough about him for that either way.* And then we both fell silent, remembering the betrothal, but I continued - my philosophy had been to pretend it wasn't happening at all. *But I know he's trying to be good, better than his mother, even if he doesn't know how to do it.*

Even if he's doing it the wrong way. And I didn't tell her about the kiss, because that was something else entirely.

She didn't quite know what to say to this. So she said something else:

The queen is afraid of you.

I laughed. *I'm afraid of the queen.*

You should be. Fear makes people more dangerous. She fears the power you have and she fears what will happen to her because there's no way she can be soldier poet king. She knows that she is the tyrant and hopes it is not true, and she fears Cassian, because she fears that he will be the reason that she will lose her crown. And that makes her dangerous.

Are you? Afraid of the queen? I remembered the sharp slap of the queen's hand across Rhia's face. I saw the memory pass over her, twisting her face for half of an instant into something darker.

Yes, she said. *Let me tell you everything I know.*

Witches, I reminded her. *We were at - not-quite-witches.*

Yes, she said, and began again. *A thousand years ago, there was an old soldier-poet-king. It was made of the soldier, the last great witch of the age -- the girl who warned the king not to cut the tree down -- and a poet who could make the water bend to her when she played her songs, who could spin golden thread with the words she sang. Then there was the king, a girl from a*

distant land, who could control the magic like - like me. They fought the king and all three died. He burned their bodies - but they say, that as the poet turned to ash, one last song poured from the funeral pyre -- the prophecy of the true soldier-poet-king. The poet, in her song, realized that the prophecy she had seen wasn't about the old three, after all, but instead a generation yet to come. But just like before, it would start with the coming of a strange girl, hair orange and wild like a lion's, in a shirt of gold like the way the old Eligida had arrived. And afterwards, the king found a collection of prophecies - all except for that very last one - in a thick book written half in Rhysean and half in a strange language --

My language, I realized. Your world got English because I'm not the first girl to have been here.

-- And the king kept it, she continued, and learned it. And passed it down - to his children, and a woman who trained a woman who trained a woman who trained a woman who became me.

But - what's in the book? I asked. If it doesn't have the prophecy.

Here, a ghost of a smile touched Rhia's face. From what I can see, it was how the king learned Rhysean. And it was how the poet and the witch - the soldier - learned your language. One wrote a passage in one language - a letter to the others, or a battle plan, or a story - or a something that has been turned

into prophecy - and the rest helped translate it into the other language. You can see each of their handwritings in the pages.

I thought about that, the friendships and vulnerabilities and loves of these three girls now teaching material for Rhia, for Cassian. Were they very good friends?

Her eyes softened. Oh Ilyaas, they were more than friends.

Oh. What a thing to be your legacy. What a thing to turn into a political weapon.

And everyone else knows the one prophecy -

Because the version the poet sang was carried by the trees to the very edge of Rhysea, Rhia replied. And the rest of us have carried it in our hearts ever since. And the kings have twisted it into something their own as best they could, because they did not own it and could not control it.

And now it's starting again, I said. Statement, not a question.

Yes, she said. All that's left, this time, is the poet.

I froze, remembering her whispered words the night of the first raid. The old eligida had become the king - would have, if she hadn't been killed. And yet in this castle, I was the soldier. Maybe you're meant to be king.

Is Cassian the soldier, then?

Let me tell you everything I know about the kings, Rhia spat instead, evading the question. They raise taxes and raze

villages and do not listen to the common folk. To not toast to their health is to toast against it. The receiving halls and palace and throne room grow more crowded with golden splendour by the day as miners die in their shafts, and yet they cannot stop for fear of the soldiers that stand at the top and watch them work. There is a draft for children as young as seven, from which new soldiers are made and fixed to the kings' will. And these children-to-soldiers lose all thought of who they could have become. Loyalty to kings over truth to self or love for family. They go home, but community is a dead word.

And I stand with them, I said, numbly.

And you stand with them, Rhia repeated, but you don't have to.

That was a dangerous statement to make, even out here in the dark and starlight, even when it was the same thing my heart had been whispering to me for days. The niggling of conscience in the back of my throat had been put into words, and that was a dangerous thing.

We sat in silence until the wind had swept her words into memory.

How do you know so much? I asked, finally. This isn't something the king tells you.

She pursed her lips. The cold pricked at my skin, making the hair on my arms stand up, but it was more than that. I -- it

was Known, capitalized and emphasized, before she ever said a word.

Because I learned English from the book of prophecy and story and love, and took it as more than an elementary primer. Because I know I come from a home that is not the castle but I was taken before I could turn thought into memory. My parents live somewhere in the world and I have not seen them since the day I could walk, and that was because the Queen decided I would serve. Because I think I may know your soldier. Because I believe that you are the king.

Hope blew in on the wind, and metallic fear followed it close behind. There was a lot of weight to those words - and they sat, thick, in the air around us. The way she phrased that implied - *Cassian is not a child of prophecy.*

Really, I responded, a statement not a question.

The soldier leads the Fretim, waiting for the poet and king to unite the people of Rhysea. The world waits for the three to find each other, and that requires you to leave. And I tell you all this because I am --

-- A rebel. I finished.

Fretim, she corrected. *It means... 'we brave collective.'*

Fret was brave, after all. *Ilms sians fret.*

Another moment passed, too heavy to do anything with but let the wind wash it into memory. Because now I held her fate in

my hands, something we were both wildly aware of. This was trust, a test with a life as the pass/fail. *Now what will you do with what you know?* Were the unspoken words. It was a dare. It was - braver than I could ever be.

What do I do now? I asked, because this was beyond what I knew. If Rhia was telling the truth, then everything I'd known for months was a lie.

If she was lying -- for the gain of her *fretim*, to have the *eligida* with them --

She wasn't lying. But I didn't know quite yet.

I believe that is something you'll have to discover, Ilyaas, she said. *You know what I think. I can do no other.*

She stood, preparing to crawl back through the window. I caught her wrist and pulled her towards me.

Wait -- I said. *Do you know where the poet is? Our poet?*

Her face saddened. *I wish I did.*

Then I had some answer. I would wait for the competition, Cassian and the queen's way of filling out the soldier poet king, and I would hope that the right person found their way to us.

I would stay -- for now. And then the second this godsforsaken competition was over, I would run.

But Rhia had also spoken of a separate soldier. A rebel -- part of the *fretim*. And she believed this girl was the true soldier.

One last thing, I asked. *Can I -- can I meet this other soldier?*

The ghost of a smile quirked onto her face. *I'll make sure you do.*

Rhia disappeared into the stacks and I clambered back through the window. I opened a book on Rhysean grammar and fell asleep into it, praying it would hold as a cover story come morning.

I dreamt of the old soldier-poet-king. I dreamt of Rhia's whispered voice, *let me tell you everything I know*. I dreamt of Cassian's smile and redemption arcs for us both and the idea that no one was completely bad.

The stars shone through the windows, strange constellations and too-silver moonlight. *Let me tell you everything I know.*

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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Episode 25: Feast of Fools

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty-five: Feast of Fools.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: There are several steps to creating a convincing ruse.

The most important, though, of course, hardest to achieve, is believing in it yourself.

Cassian and I were both keeping this sort of secret -- the pretending of the sort where you become the thing you say.

Mine was that I was his. His was that he was king.

Three weeks passed, and we went on three more raids. I sent three more people to Somewhere Else -- capitalized, emphasized -- trying to defend myself -- because these were Rhia's people, these were people she might know, any of these people could be

the soldier she wanted me to meet. I did not want to kill them, but they were trying to kill me.

I did not want to kill them, but I did. Because it was a battle. I still don't know if Somewhere Else is better or worse, but I can hope. That it's at least better than us striking them down and lighting their corpses on fire.

And after every raid, we marched through the town, and I saw the stares the people gave me. *Vatakina eligida. You were supposed to be on our side.*

But I kept riding. I lifted my chin and let whoever was in charge set a victory wreath on my head. I did what they told me but I did not make excuses or lower my gaze. I kept my promise in my heart but didn't dare to put it into action.

Because I was waiting for the poet.

But that was another lie I told myself, tried to make myself believe.

The truth is - I was scared. How easily we slaughtered the *fretim. We brave collective*, they were called, but how easily they fell under our boots as we burned them to the ground.

I was scared to stand with them. I was scared to stand against Cassian, to die like that.

Tell yourself a lie. Turn it into a truth. Bury the shame so deep down inside it no longer stands.

Just wait. Just wait just wait, I told myself. You're doing the right thing to wait. You're doing the right thing to find the poet first.

I visited more families with Cassian -- of our soldiers, his soldiers, that had died. *Ilms-sians-fret*. I didn't get it wrong this time. He gave the sword to the siblings of the one who died, or to the spouse the mother the parent the father, gave them his best solemn face and told them their soldier died well. I offered the best condolences I could. *Ilms sians fret. Gratinoc*. And in their eyes, too, I could see it -- *why didn't you save them? If you're the one we've waited for.*

I wondered if somewhere the *fretim* mourned for the ones we'd killed. They had to have had - families. Lovers. Friends. They existed outside of the void of our missions. Did they do like we did? Bring a relic to the loved ones of the deceased? Tell them more than a kind lie? *This battle was one that mattered.*

The feast drew closer. Bards arrived. The taverns around the castle -- all throughout the city -- began to fill with people from across the land. Cassian and I snuck out -- *snuck out*, where the soldiers let us past the gate with a smirk then an averted glance and there was no real danger to any of it. We visited a tavern -- far different from the one Rhia took me to. There was no current of rebellion there. We wore cloaks and

simple clothes and I covered my head so no one could see my hair. We listened as poets sung songs and the tavern roared around them. They were all splendid singers, but not what I'd found in the *Eligidanim Traem*.

They told the stories of adventures I've never known. How it feels to cross the *solus mantibus* beyond Rhysea and feel the smooth rocks of distant lands beneath your feet. The look of giant trees crashed onto the pebble beaches, stripped of their bark, aching, white, and waiting -- the way the wind sings you to shore. The way the ocean takes you to sleep.

Some of these bards -- I still don't know all the words, even now. I didn't know them then. But the way they're sung, you can *feel* it in your chest -- the aching.

It was very different than Rhia's secret words and *there will come a soldier* and the world narrowing down to a lyre and a singer and the soul-shaking hope that comes with the promise of something better. But it wasn't -- bad.

We made our way back early in the morning, as the stars in their strange constellations disappeared into the sky and it began to hint at sunrise, the gray-blue-black of maybe-morning.

We didn't have to climb through or over anything to get back in. The guards let us through the gate and into the castle and stepped aside from outside my room as Cassian gave me his

blinding smile of *this was nice*. And he looked nice, peasant clothes instead of a king's. He looked -- real.

So I ran inside before he could kiss me. It had been four and a half weeks and we'd only spoken once of the fact that we were, for all intents and purposes, engaged, and it had been a brief exchange, quickly shut down by me. As if I just ignored it, it would go away and Cassian and I would go back to whatever we were before. So when his eyes went soft and he stepped in, half a pace, a question not a command, I slammed the door behind me, because the cry of *traitor, traitor* to Rhia and Cassian both had woken up inside my heart and I knew I needed to bury it.

Really, I knew that there was no going back to before -- you can't unlearn that you've spent months stomping out the only chance Rhysea has at peace. You can't pretend you don't see a monster wearing a crown and calling herself king.

But that didn't mean I felt nothing for Cassian. It just meant I had to keep myself the hell under control.

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Episode 26: Feast of Fools, Part Two

[CHIME OF A PHONE RECORDER BEING TURNED ON.]

[RAINFALL.]

[NYX SIGHS]

NYX

Note to Future Nyx.

[RAINFALL CONTINUES.]

Do you ever feel the world slipping through your hands? Not like sand, it's not steady enough for that. It's like- it's like you've been pirouetting nonstop for days, for years. Head snapping back to that focus point. Your momentum carrying you round and round, pivot, pivot, pivot. And then all of a sudden you realise you lost sight of your spot. Your body's moving faster than your head. Any moment you might twist it right off at the neck. And the world is just- a blur. Of colour and sound and it's so loud but it's like you're listening to it through water.

Does that make sense?

[BEAT.]

I started reading these monologues for fun. They're just- a little spooky, y'know? Something silly and spooky to practice my acting with, to spend time... with Bella.

But someone doesn't want me to read them.

[THUNDER RUMBLES.]

Like, *really* doesn't want me to read them. And I can't help wondering... where did they come from? *Who* wrote them? What do they mean?

How far are they willing to go?

How far am I?

[THUNDER RUMBLING.]

[CHIME OF A PHONE RECORDER BEING TURNED OFF.]

MORGAN

The Attic Monologues is an urban fantasy horror podcast releasing the last Wednesday of every month. Find us on the podcatcher of your choice, or wander into someplace abandoned and listen for a voice on the wind.

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty-six: Feast of Fools, Part Two

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: Rhia was waiting on my bed. She stared at me with the frown of I-know-where-you've-been, and I sent her back the look of *nothing happened*.

It wasn't as nice as the tavern you took me to, I said, flippantly, shucking off my cloak and hanging it up. A different atmosphere. I'd rate it lower. Three stars on Yelp. You still know all the best spots.

Ilyaas -- she began, prying and already sorry at the same time. There was a lot in the way she said my name. Remember who you are. Remember who he is.

They didn't recognize us, I continued. It's okay.

That is not what I meant, she snapped, slamming the wardrobe door shut behind me. You know what I'm saying. There are two sides, and your prince --

Your prince, she'd said. Well - prometide. She'd switched to Rhysean for it. It's - like. Betrothed, but affectionate. My love. The one I'm bound to. She'd said it like a curse.

I'd known the word, though I hadn't learned it from her. Cassian had used it, in our brief conversation about our betrothal. I'd made him define it for me, and he'd flushed. I'd had to drag it out of him, his ears red, and that was when I ended the conversation.

- he can be swayed, I cut in. We were both red now, that word spoken into existence, but I was nothing if not insufferably stubborn. Without his mother's voice whispering in his ears, he's... true.

This was more a hope said aloud than any promise or thing made easily true. But I couldn't pretend I didn't love him, at least a little bit. Despite everything.

I could hear Rhia's teeth grinding together. *I've known him a lot longer than you have, Ilyaas. He's not good.*

I didn't think, then, about the people he'd killed, because I'd killed people, too. But the tavern songs washed through my head and I was still dizzy with the day. And the more I clung to that hope, the more I believed he could be changed. *Tell yourself a lie. Turn it into the truth.*

But I know him better than you do. All he wants is to be known.

Rhia bit her lip but didn't say anything, shuffled some papers on the desk in a way that screamed she was annoyed. But she didn't bring it up again.

And I believed it. There was good in Cassian. And, more than that, despite everything, I didn't want to lose him.

That evening -- I had slept through most of the day, after our night out, and I'd been told not to wander, regardless -- all of the poets that had come were invited to the castle for a feast. The next day, the competition would begin, but that night was for showing off before it truly mattered, was for the kings to flaunt their wealth and their son and -- me. Cassian sat at the head of his own table -- the king of prophecy, burnished

gold and and beautiful -- and I to his right -- the soldier. The seat on his left was left empty, symbolic, waiting for his poet, the rest of the table filled with guards and soldiers from Cassian's legion and visiting nobles. While the kings sat at an elevated table, both on one side overlooking the feast, Cassian and I dined at the long tables with all else.

And, god, were there a lot of people. Cassian informed me that this was only the half of it, that all the no-name poets that hadn't secured a seat were being fed on the steps of the palace, among the marketplace sprawl set up for the occasion. A true festival, for everyone around.

The thing about poets is that they don't sit still. They're driven by the songs in their head or the feel of the universe all around them to *move*, to keep moving until everything makes sense. Even as we sat, even as we remained in our seats, they didn't, leaping all about the hall, getting up and talking to their friends long-time-not-seen.

And many came to talk to us, whether they were rich themselves or no, because we were their future, maybe, possibly, just as much as they were ours. It would've been flattering, I think, if I'd been able to understand. But every *my sovereign* followed by some sweeping lyrical compliment Cassian struggled to translate soured around the smiles I offered in return, because all I could think was how much I hated *not knowing*, how

much I hated myself for taking part in these festivities while Rhysea died outside the lavish hall we dined in.

There were hundreds of them -- girls and boys and folks that were neither or both or somewhere in-between, clutching every portable instrument you've seen and half you haven't. That many seventeen-year-olds in one room was the closest environment I'd encountered to my high school since I'd arrived, three hundred teenagers playing political games poised as something else. Sponsors, too, came with their found poet and bowed and made their remarks, old and graying shoving forth the young and bright. Music played nonstop, though no one at the castle had hired musicians, but this was a party for bards -- there were always five or six or ten poets scattered throughout, standing on tables, perching on benches with a half-circle crowd 'round them, peddling the only ware that mattered that night.

Despite my anxieties -- god, *loathing*, *vague self-loathing*, really is a more fitting word -- it was something spectacular. I was straining my ears to pick out the tune of a girl with a little harp when the hall went silent, a rippling sort of hush that started at our table and spread out. I turned towards Cassian to see what was wrong.

A boy had taken the empty seat to Cassian's left -- the one meant for the poet. The one meant to remain empty all evening.

The hall stared. The boy grinned, a wolf's grin, sharp teeth and sharp edges staining him and the lyre he set on the table. Cassian rose, his shoulders tightening with anger, and the boy stood in tandem with him, dropping into an exaggeratedly low bow, flourishes and all. The two chairs scraped along the floor, echoing round the room.

My sovereigns, said the wolf-boy, his golden hair flopping out of his face as he stood. *Rex. Soldat.*

Explain yourself, Cassian ground out in Rhysean, his words dangerous, loud enough for all to hear.

This seat is for the poet, no? The boy asked, deceptively light. He spread his pale hands, saying, *I am the poet.*

Well -- *seanoc poeta*. I am -- poet. This seat is for -- poet. Whether this was *the* poet or a poet, I couldn't tell you. It's vague in Rhysean -- articles don't exist. Intentions are often assumed. Which worked in the boy's favor, I suppose. Left his chessboard open enough to not end with his head and the rest of his body in two separate pieces.

It was clear what he meant, though. Technicalities aside.

He stepped around Cassian, lyre still flung across the table. The boy stepped around to me, and, unsure of what else to do, I stood, too. *Vatakina Eligida - Your hair is brighter than I'd imagined*, he said, grandly, in Rhysean. *Do me the honor of letting me tell your and the king's stories.*

I stumbled something out, fragmented, not quite a sentence, about competitions and opportunities and songs. He just smiled, and bowed, not *unphased by* so much as *having expected* my shitty Rhysean.

Which -- I don't know, was a bit of a shock. There was always a flash of disappointment in people's eyes when they realized how little I really knew.

Cassian cocked his head just slightly -- appraising. He gave the boy a once-over before asking his name.

Well -- demanding. A question delivered as a statement, the words of a king. *Your name.*

Io, the boy said, *Io from the Far Shore.*

Io, Cassian repeated, measuredly. *I hope you're able to spin gold with your stories.*

Io's eyes sparked -- his *ploy*, however bull-headed it had seemed from the outset, had paid off. But that was *Io* -- every move was calculated down to the last. He had a nasty habit of making the improbable on paper possible in person. Cunning -- that's the word for people like him. *Don't worry*, he said, and bowed again, *I can.*

And then he was gone, snatching his lyre from the table and disappearing into the crowd. Cassian's eyes followed him as he weaved back, the wolf-boy already talking anew with people on his way. I knew that look on Cassian -- he was running his own

calculations, playing out all the risks. And he was liking the results.

A thousand bards had descended on the city, all hoping to set themselves apart with a half-schemed *somehow*. Io from the Far Shore had just managed it.

Another boy, some fifteen minutes later, tried to slide into the poet's seat, too. That boy spent the rest of his evening outside of the palace gates.

As Cassian walked me back to my room that night, revelries echoing up from the streets below, his mind was still turning with whatever plan he'd started concocting when Io sat down beside us. *Get some rest*, he told me, leaning against my door frame as I stepped inside. *We start listening tomorrow after breakfast. And I want to go exploring tomorrow night -- it'll be better if you're with me.* His eyes cleared as he pushed away his train of thought, and grinned. *I did promise we'd see everything.*

A laugh echoed up from somewhere far below. A lively tune filtered through the din of stone, partygoers clapping and cheering as poets challenged each other in the streets. I grinned back, and nodded, trying to believe my lies, and swallowed down the apprehension bubbling in my throat.

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Episode 27: Poet

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty-seven: Poet.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: We sat in an amphitheater, enclosed on three sides, the fourth open to the street, so sound filtered out and into the city. It was eleven-fifteen in the morning, give or take, and Cassian and the kings and I were listening to poets sing.

The king was already asleep in his throne. The queen had a tight-lipped smile that reeked of disapproval that appeared whenever she glanced to her right to see the drowsy king, so she'd taken to not looking.

We'd been there four hours. The poets played on.

This competition had seemed fun in retrospect: listen to music, sneak out with Rhia or Cassian in the evenings and do fun

festival things that heavily relied on drinking and poor decision-making. Music and mayhem, king-sanctioned -- and we got a poet out of it -- we'd find our third, and I could convince them to come with me when I finally gathered my nerve and ran. It was a perfect daydream, in my head, and somehow it always ended with Cassian seeing his wrongs and tagging along, whether or not he was king after all. I wasn't ever really sure on the semantics of this part, glossing over it in my daydreams in a haze of *we'll get drunk and have a heart-to-heart and the whole thing'll get sorted*, but in all my envisionings of the poet festival, I hadn't expected -- well -- *drudgery*.

Here's how each performance went, roughly: the heralds called a name. Many of the names dragged on, title after title that the kings never seemed very impressed with stumbling out until a bard would climb onto the stage, instrument in hand, dressed in their best. After about an hour, it was easy enough to tell who was going to be shit -- the herald would announce their name for at least half as long as they ended up singing. It became a game between Cassian and I -- seeing how long we could make faces at each other as the shitty bards waited for their names to be finished before the queen caught us staring at hissed at us from between her teeth.

Cassian had glanced my way and mouthed *told you so* after the first one. It was then I remembered our conversation from

the first day under the enarbol -- something along the lines of only the unexceptional reaching for strings of titles to give them meaning. It seemed this applied not just to kings, but poets, too.

And just as it was easy to tell who was going to be shit, after an hour it became just as easy to pick apart those who were sponsored by someone in the court from the rest -- they would be dressed in a frightening amount of gold. While the caliber of performance seemed to be higher in this lot -- seemed the court had taken the promise of *generous compensation* at finding the next poet pretty seriously -- it soon became another joke between Cassian and I, trying to count from our distance the amount of precious metal laced onto each bard and comparing our tallies on our hands across the queen's disapproving form.

Don't get me wrong -- there were beautiful musicians. The first five and ten and fifteen I was entranced for -- at least, for all the non-shitty ones -- but you can only listen to something intently for so long before you start to zone out. Whoever had made the schedule hadn't seemed overly concerned with taking breaks.

Maybe that was shitty of us -- not taking this as seriously as all of the bards out there singing. Somewhere in my mind, I guess I'd figured that I'd know when I heard them. Even though it was never my intention, I found myself comparing these poets

to the one Rhia and I had heard in the Eligidanim Traem, who sang out our prophecy with such soul-shaking certainty.

They always fell short.

A lunch break came at noon, and I practically leaped to my feet, desperate to be out of my chair and moving after so long. I was starving, and a little bit cranky, and had to stop myself from snapping at the courtiers who swarmed our row as the queen tried to subtly wake the king and Cassian and I stood. Servers came, too, bearing food, and I cast my gaze desperately to Cassian, hoping he'd see how badly I needed to start walking. His return glance told me to cool it.

I snagged a roll from a tray and squeezed my way over to stand behind Cassian, stretching onto my toes to put my chin onto his shoulder and wrapping my arms around his torso from behind. *I'm bored*, I huffed around a mouthful of bread, and he tilted his chin so he could make sure I saw him straight on as he rolled his eyes. *And I'm pretty sure half these people are lying about their age. I highly doubt there are this many seventeen-year-olds in Rhysea, let alone musically talented ones.*

This is important, Ilyaas, he said, but I know you know that. We will know when we find the right one. It's just a few more hours, today. And then we'll spend the evening in the city.

Getting drunk and eating sugar scones? I asked hopefully, half teasing, half demanding.

He snatched the other half of the roll from my hand and lifted it to his mouth. I made a face, and he raised his eyebrows, as if to say, *not as if our lips haven't been closer.*

Which made me lose my mind again. I untangled myself from him and folded my arms against my own chest.

Sure, he said, *as many sugar scones as you can stomach without throwing up on your boots.*

Sugar scones was a safer topic than kisses. *It'll be more than you can.*

Right, Cassian laughed, *because you've got both the sugar- and alcohol- tolerance of a child. It's not a fair competition.*

I smacked his arm and turned to get more bread. At the far end of the row, Io from the Far Shore talked to a guard who, after a long moment, let him pass. Io locked eyes with me and grinned wickedly, teeth sharp and glinting.

Snake alert, I hissed, tracking Io tracking us as he slid through the crowd to where we stood. Cassian frowned, confused, before following my line of sight to Io from the far shore, ten feet away and getting closer every second. He shifted, then, into a princeling, a change I caught as it happened rather than after. His posture straightened, chin lifted, eyes shutting down

into something cooler.

I vehemently ripped into my bread.

Io stopped, bowed. Came up with that same dangerous grin he seemed to live in. *My sovereigns*, he said.

Io from the Far Shore, Cassian responded smoothly, in Rhysean. It was easy to see him as a king when he acted like this -- the kind that would rule like his parents. He was a kinder sort of king, more sunset-gold, less burnished, when he laughed about sweets and lay upside-down off a bed and stopped posturing. Pretending. *I hope you are ready to spin gold today, as you promised.*

Always for you, my king, said Io. He turned to me. *And what does the soldier want from my show? Gold, too? A flower, to tuck into that hair of yours?*

Cassian translated. I raised an eyebrow. *How about a short performance and a tray of sugar scones?*

It sounded less bitchy in Rhysean, but that was only because I didn't know how to make it sound bitchy in Rhysean. Full bitchiness was intended, in the English I arranged it from in my mind. Io chuckled -- *gods*, do you know how much I hate that word? *Chuckled?* But it was true -- and it fit him, and it conveys just how uncomfortable the not-quite-laugh was to hear.

As the king wills it, Io responded. I didn't need a translation for that. And I was already enough on edge around

him to understand the message in it -- *I'd be the king's poet, not yours, eligidida.*

That was fine. I made a mental note that, if for some godsforsaken reason he was the poet, I would silently inconvenience him with shitty bits of magic for as long as we had to work together.

But Cassian seemed to like that response. A glint came into his eyes -- the wheel-churn-y kind. Io was a contender to Cassian, and we hadn't even heard him sing yet.

Show us your skills, Cassian said. *But don't be a --* he used a word here -- *pendarferronear* -- that doesn't have an easy translation. It's like... show-off, and *pompous asshat*, and *overconfident purveyor of mediocre talents* rolled into one. I think it was a joke. *Don't drag it on. I'd like to see the festival before midnight.*

As you wish, my sovereign. Io bowed again, hands clasped in front of him. *So you'll be attending the festival this evening?*

Ilyaas and I along with the rest of Rhysea, he said. *It's hardly surprising. Who wouldn't want to see the city lit up?*

I can't imagine, my king. He turned to me. *Eligida. I wish the both of you the best of afternoons.* He paused. *And that you find the right poet, king. Whoever they may be.*

And with that, he left.

I don't like him, I said the second I was sure Io was out of earshot.

Why not? Cassian asked, but before I could spill a million versions of *he's cunning and slippery and seems like he'd bring a gun to a knife fight*, the competition was starting once more, and I was sat back down into my chair, listening to a thousand and one more poets.

That was when Leander walked onto the stage.

Do you remember Leander, listener? The bard of the Eligidanim Traem. I told you, then, that they were important to our story, but not quite, at the time. We've traveled the miles to go to reach their crossroads.

This is Leander. And they're glorious.

Leander Feldrea Enrellero, called the herald, and Cassian sent me a look that meant, *this should be good*, because there was just enough divination in the name Feldrea Enrellero -- a play off of the words *Feldram Enrellem*, which is like... an enchanted old story. A legend given voice and wind. *From the Southern Fronts. No sponsor.*

I caught my breath as they stepped onto the stage. I recognized them, felt the chill run through my chest at the thrill of magic like this, stories told like they did.

This is it, I couldn't help but think. Screw Io from the Far Shore and every last string on his lyre. Cassian will hear them, and he'll know.

Leander stood differently, on that stage. They'd been so comfortable in the tavern, sure of their actions. Inspired and alight with the ideas they held, that they dug up and spilled out for the rest of us to cling to and hope. *There will come a soldier, there will come a poet, there will come a king who will right this broken world.* They'd gestured and argued and turned it over to song when words failed, words failed.

Here, they hesitated. Closed their eyes, steadied themselves. Hitched in a breath, then another, one-one-two-two.

And then -- gods above.

I've compared them to Orpheus. It's the closest we have to a similar legend, where the flowers bloom and the night weeps comets down to earth and you're stretching, stretching, trying to pluck stardust from the sky to create a vessel big enough to hold it all. It's haunting melodies and mourning for a world and hoping for something better in the same breath, it's plucked strings and minor keys and a soaring voice thick with love all the same.

How do you describe the song of a poet who can spin gold from air? How do you describe the song of a poet, so perfectly in tune with your soul that maybe it's your heart that's stopped

beating or maybe it's that the song is so perfectly in synch that you can't hear the pounding but for the plucking of the lyre?

I didn't even realize I was crying until I felt the wet on the backs of my hands, until Leander's last note swayed out over us and they hesitated, hesitated, before dragging a fist, thumb flat against the top of it, from shoulder to shoulder and crossing their fingers out towards us like a broken promise. They ducked their head and left the stage. I sat, frozen, as around me the arena began to clap. I didn't know how to move after that. How to act.

The next bard walked onto the stage. Cassian caught my eye and gestured to the tears staining my face. My face flushed, and I snapped back into focus, scrubbing my palms against my cheeks and mouthing *the song* back to him. *Leander from the Southern Front*, I said, as the next poet began to screech out their tune. *Pers. Please.*

He grinned and turned back to the stage.

The sun began to set. Somewhere in the mix, Io finally played, a song somewhere between fine and fair, an idolation of the kings. A bootlicker -- he made no point of hiding it, though that didn't negate the threat he seemed to be. The crowd clapped, and he bowed, and gestured grandly towards our booth.

His lips formed the words *for the kings*, but the sound was lost underneath the noise of the crowd, applause and such.

He did not turn words into gold like he'd promised. But he'd instead proved something much more useful: he was malleable. Power is power to some, no matter what you have to do to keep it.

Cassian nodded. As did the queen. *I think he did well*, said Cassian, and I felt a sick sort of dread in the pit of my stomach. *Ilyaas? You agree?*

I think he was fine, I replied, careful to keep my tone neutral. *But there were others I enjoyed more.*

He made a sound of dissent. *Music is subjective, I suppose.*

The last poet played, and we headed out for the festival.

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Episode 28: Come together.

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty-eight: Come Together.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: Cassian and I wandered down into the market, ducking among fire jugglers, street musicians, more bards, bands, all sorts. Vendors hawked their wares, calling out to the people milling through the streets in Rhysean, the words lost among the muddle for me, but their carts and tables and tents, half-full of creations I didn't have words for, were suitable enough.

We didn't disguise ourselves, didn't put on hoods or change into more common clothing. I wore my midas shirt and stomping boots and had my sword at my side; Cassian was a princeling through and through, chin high and shoulder knocking into mine

every few steps, the sort of soft smile on his face that made my chest ache.

Rex, came the calls, from the vendors, from the poets. *Rex et soldat, soldat, vatakina eligida.*

Twilight faded in above us. We stopped to watch a play in the street, a troupe of actors set up on a temporary stage. I struggled through translations as the actors bounced their lines around, iambs like thumping hearts, like patter songs, running through them. The crowd grew and thinned and grew again, but we stayed, and laughed, and tossed coins to the actors with the rest of the gathered when they took their bows.

Rex, one of them said, *eligida*. They crowded the edge of the stage, and Cassian took the hands of the girl at the front, her eyes done up in green and gold.

Gratinoc, he said, and pressed his forehead to the back of her hands. *Gratinoc*.

It was this Cassian I loved. Soft, eyes filled with delight.

It was as we turned to go that I saw Rhia, a glimpse, an idea, at the edge of the gathered crowd. It was as our eyes locked that the girl from the Eligidanim Traem, from the party -- Rhia's lover, or Rhia's friend, the one Cassian told the soldiers to never let back into the castle -- shouldered her way

to Rhia's side and put a hand around her waist, unaware of how still Rhia had gone.

Cassian followed my gaze, and his darkened. He broke through the crowd like the prince he could be, no shoving, just movement, intentional and solid, as other people had the sense to get out of his way. My heart stuttering, I scrambled after him, dogging his steps as the blood drained from Rhia's face.

The girl caught sight of us. She did not flinch away, but put a step between Rhia and herself before dropping into a low, sarcastic bow.

My sovereigns, she drawled, the words an odd fit in her mouth, and as she stood, her eyes raked over the two of us -- not missing the anxiety I'm sure had flushed my cheeks, the anger that had turned Cassian's the same.

Cassian's eyes met the girl's, electricity crackling between them. She still did not flinch. Neither did Cassian. They were mirrors of each other, shoulders squared and chins raised and mouths quirked like any second they might bare their teeth.

I darted in front of Cassian the same moment Rhia slid in front of the girl, her the only one of the two of us tall enough to break their gaze. I didn't know what my plan was besides *stop this festival from becoming a war*, but Cassian sidestepped me.

The girl smirked. She did not take her hands from Rhia's waist, and that was when Cassian's eyes slid down to where they rested.

If it was possible for Rhia to look any more afraid, it was then.

Rhia, Cassian said, his voice short. There was a slight measure of politeness to it, a bit of prince, a bit of king that survived this girl. *Who is this?*

Who is this, of course, meant *do you know who this is*. He said it in English -- a conversation for the three of us and no one else. It hit me, for just a second, what life could've been if our paths had intertwined a little differently, if Cassian and Rhia and I had grown into a group of three, against the world together. Instead, there were three different histories: Rhia and Cassian, a childhood long past that I hardly knew. Rhia and I -- nights and starlight and stories-for-words and kindred spirits. And Cassian and I -- a future of greatness and a past-and-present of blood and swords and something else, k-words and camaraderie. Like the cover of the *Falsettos* playbill -- *this is how we connect, but not quite all together*.

This is... Rhia stuttered. *Cassian, this is...*

She turned to the girl, pulling her hands from her waist. She murmured to her in Rhysean. The girl stepped around Rhia. *Iolo*, she said. *Hello, my sovereigns*.

Cassian pursed his lips. In Rhysean, he said, *You were banned from the palace.*

This is not the palace, Iolo retorted.

She is of the palace, Cassian said, nodding to Rhia.

She belongs to herself, Iolo said.

Rhia winced. Cassian said, slowly, *she has a role to fill, like all of us. What is your role, Iolo from Around?*

Iolo smirked and said nothing. Rhia whispered something to her, fast and low, hardly pricking my hearing. Iolo said something back, her lips drawn up in a snarl. Her eyes flashed towards Cassian -- and then she laughed.

To provide entertainment to those who seek it, King. I'd be happy to provide you with the same, given a dark room and enough silver.

Cassian flushed, flinching backwards. *That's -- I --*

Rhia was a rebel, part of the Fretim, and even though I hadn't known for certain at the time, I would've bet my sword that Iolo was, too. Rhia's lover, Rhia's partner in... rebellion. Crime. But Iolo had guessed right, the thing that would make Cassian fold his hand and break his focus. Maybe Rhia had told her. Maybe Rhia had known.

Yes, King? The girl purred.

Rhia -- Cassian said. *We'll talk later. Please.*

Rhia nodded, still pale, and Cassian whirled away. I stood, staring at the two of them for a breath, two, before Iolo said, in slow Rhysean -- *who do you stand with, Eligida?*

I checked over my shoulder -- Cassian was disappearing into the crowd. *Rhia*, I whispered. *I stand with Rhia.*

Iolo cackled. *Then stay, Eligida. Come with us.*

Iolo -- Rhia protested, and the girl shot her a look. I froze.

I -- I --

Ilyaas, you don't have to do that, Rhia said, in English, and repeated herself in Rhyean as Iolo started. *Your time. Your choices.*

I panicked, shot another glance over at where Cassian had vanished. *I can't -- not yet. I need to find Cassian.*

Rhia repeated my words back to the other girl, and she bared her teeth. *Fine, then. Go find your king, aestas.*

Another word that's hard to explain. It means -- puppet, I guess. Malleable. A conduit of someone else's will. I hadn't known it then, but had assumed it was an insult.

I mouthed *sorry* to Rhia. And I went to go find Cassian.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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Episode 29: Fall Apart

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty-nine: Fall Apart.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: Cassian had come across another traveling group of performers, a band, two women on drums and a man with a high, clear voice and a person with a sort of tambourine that they tapped against their hip as they rounded out the man's song with harmonies in a voice much lower than his. Cassian's shoulders had come down, the tension releasing the longer he stayed, and as I came up behind him I slipped my arms around his waist and stood on my toes to rest my chin on his shoulder. My ears burned, half-certain Iolo was watching my action, but I refused to let her have my head. Cassian started as I did, just for a moment, before he realized it was me and wrapped my hands in

his. *Careful, Ilyaas*, he murmured, keeping his voice pitched low to not interrupt the performance. I could feel the words more in his chest, a rumble and an idea, than through the air. *Startle me too badly and I might accidentally stick a sword through your stomach.*

I laughed and swallowed the bit of anxiety that still sat in my own throat. *I'd like to see you try.*

We stood like that until my calves hurt from standing on my toes. As we shuffled, as I leaned back against his chest, I could feel his heart speed up for ten, twelve beats before he finally said -- *Rhia has never had very good taste in women. I worry that she'll find trouble and not realize until she's drowning in it.*

If we hadn't been standing in such a way that my breathing would've betrayed my anxieties, I would've let out such a shaky exhale. After all of that, he didn't suspect Rhia as part of the *Fretim* -- maybe Iolo, but he'd assumed Rhia had no part in it. Just that she thought with her heart, a trait the two of us knew too well and tried to ignore, and had gotten caught in a web without realizing it made her dinner. *Poor Rhia*, it meant. *Someone needs to tell Rhia*, it meant.

Which meant, selfishly, that Cassian hadn't made any connections between Iolo and I, either.

What do you mean? I hedged. She wasn't very... friendly... but I don't think there's anything wrong with her. As long as she's kind to Rhia.

Cassian sighed -- I could feel the huff of the air against my neck. The girl seems -- seems like she has distaste for the kings. For you and I -- for Rhia, and her position, by extension. I simply worry that she's... with the rebels.

My heart sunk. Oh. But you don't think Rhia --

No. I don't think she would. He shifted, cleared his throat. I've known her too long, I have to believe I've known her heart -- I -- he stopped. Laughed, more to himself, something I again felt more in his chest than in the air. Let's get drunk, Ilyaas.

This was a safer road than the path we were walking down. I laughed and spun away from him, throwing a coin to the performers and crossing my arms. Let's. But you promised me sugar scones, first. As many as I could eat.

As many as you could eat without throwing up on my boots, he corrected, so I stuck out my tongue at him and followed him into the crowd as the sun set around us, as day turned into gloaming turned into night, only half-dark on account of the festival lights, stretching out the night into a forever-sunset day.

The longer we wandered, the rowdier the crowd became, I discovered the festival was this:

Pockets of fried dough, doused in powdered sugar and dipped in steaming little cups of a peculiar dark red berry sauce that tasted somewhere between a plum and a raspberry. Cassian showed me how to rip off the bottom of the little brown paper cone you got them in, so you could spill the leftover powdered sugar into your mouth like a pixie stick. It was spiced chocolate drinks you dumped rum and cream into in equal measure, fruits in odd shapes I begged Cassian to buy so I could try, that he laughed at because he'd grown up around them so never thought them strange. But isn't that the best sort of magic? The mundane kind that turns into something bright only after it's pointed out?

Even against the sky fading into night, kites spiraled and flapped. Floating lanterns tied to strings, tethers of tiny human-made starlight, glowed warmly above our heads and soared gaily around. The streets were filled with laughter and warm bodies, jostling by each other with the sort of energy that only comes with joy.

And music, everywhere. This was a festival for poets, after all, and even though I'd nearly gone sick with boredom listening to the poets all day in the castle, there was something different and free about street music. Rowdier.

Cassian dragged me into a tavern to listen.

We found a seat at the bar -- a seat, the rest of the tavern so crowded that there wasn't a second seat to have without charming someone out of it, so Cassian grinned the boy next to my seat out of his own, and I scoffed at his flirtations and big eyes and the triumphant little eyebrow wiggle he shot me as he slid into the now-vacant seat until another boy came along, a poet with a silver tongue, and charmed Cassian back out of his in turn. So, Cassian ended up behind me, leaning against the stool, pressed against my back with an elbow loose on my shoulder as he reached over me to take drinks from the bar and offer shouted laughter to the tavernkeeper, a woman with silver woven into the ends of her dark hair and the beginnings of crow's feet around her eyes. The heat from him was a comfort, and as we laughed messily with the poet that had swindled Cassian his seat, and the boy Cassian had swindled off the same seat before, the world twinkled and glowed with that special sort of haze that comes with knowing you're making heart memories.

The three boys around me took their *traem* like shots and laughed as I sputtered it down. As my head grew hazy and I switched to water, they booed until Cassian charmed the tavernkeeper -- or the three of them did, a group charming, a bard and a prince and a boy-from-somewhere and their not unsubstantial combined wit and grace -- into bringing me a hot

cider - juice, it was hot juice, spiced like autumn and blissfully sobering. Cassian laughed at my low alcohol tolerance until I began to warn I'd keep drinking and throw up on his boots like he'd teased to spite him, so he shut his mouth, watching with a quirked grin as I blew on my cider and dumped cream into it and shoved away the flask the silver-tongued poet pushed at me.

He wrapped an arm loosely around my collar, and I turned my face up to his as another poet began to sing, somewhere behind us in the tavern, as the building thrummed with people pounding on tables as the bard's voice soared over top like a gull over the waves.

Hmm, said the voice in my head, a little woozy still, hopped up on sugar and alcohol and the magic of the night. I stared at Cassian, and Cassian stared back, face inches away, and I was just drunk enough to not have the sense to flinch away but stared openly -- *hmmm*.

The boy from somewhere jeered. That was all the sense I needed to come back into myself, nearly throwing my nose into my cider.

It took me several minutes, face half-flushed from drink and half from how close we'd come again to something so odd -- god, I don't want to say the word *kiss*, it's still not any better in my head in my mouth, but there it is -- to realize

that the poet beside us had been, in his own turn, charmed from his seat, that this new boy Cassian was conversing with in hard-to-pick-apart Rhysean was not the silver-tongued boy, but --

Io. From the Far Shore.

His eyes flicked to mine as I recognized him, and he bared his teeth. *Eligida*.

Snake, I muttered in English, because he couldn't understand me and I was just disconnected enough to not care that Cassian did.

Cassian shot me a frown, shifting his weight off of my chair and standing tall. Becoming Cassius Rex, prince and prophesied king, not a boy half-drunk on beer and bard songs. Our two compatriots -- the bard and boy -- seemed to sense the shift. The poet put his hand to the arm of the boy and angled his head away, and with a half-joking salute to me, went to go sit closer to the rest of the crowd.

Why are you here? I fumbled out in my messy Rhysean.

Io tilted his head. *It's a festival. I'm a poet.*

Seanoc poeta -- there's no articles in Rhysean, and it drives me crazy even now that I don't know if he meant it as *I'm the poet* or *I'm a poet*. A poet means *this is a festival, this is where we all are, and this is the tavern I chose to spend my time*.

The poet means he is the king, and you are the soldier, and so that's why I'm beside you.

I didn't know how to make him specify -- *no, why are you here, with us, in this bar* -- I was too flustered to figure out how to make that into a sentence in my mind, and before I could piece it out or make Cassian do it for me, I took up again with whatever conversation he and Cassian had been carrying on, smooth and quick and -- I swear -- deliberately complex, near impossible for me to follow.

And I was still a little too far gone in cups and sugar to be polite, to care about pleasing this dangerous boy, so I scooped up my cider glass and stood, wobbly, from my seat. *I'm going to go watch the poets*, I mumbled, already trying to spot the boy and bard we'd made friends with in the crowd, and by that point Cassian was far enough into his conversation, the gears in his head turning on a far different plane than those which concerned themselves with me, that he just nodded, caught my free hand and squeezed it and gave a hasty, heavily accented *don't go too far* before he was back in lilting Rhysean, rapid and rolling.

The poet and the boy welcomed me warmly back into their little group -- they'd made more friends, a girl, this time, with thousands of tiny braids spilling over her shoulders and down her back, a scar high on her cheek and shoulder muscles so

defined that my slightly tipsy bi little heart skipped a beat and wondered how to respectfully tell her how gorgeous she was. I introduced myself in stumbling Rhysean, and she gave me her name back -- Myena -- causing me to realize I'd never found the names of the two boys I'd made friends with, and they introduced themselves -- Castor and Pollux, the latter the poet.

They all seemed to know who I was -- all seemed to know who Cassian was, what it meant that we stood together -- but it phased them little. We were fast friends, friends for the night and nothing more, and there was a frantic sort of longing, frantic sort of energy to that that we all seemed to feel -- *memorize these faces as quick as you can and ask them the thirty six questions, because tonight is the first and last night you'll have the chance.* Myena went to the bar and came back with the same cider I'd been drinking, offered me her glass when I laughed and stumbled out a sentence somewhere along the lines of *my favorite, good choice.* We cheered and jeered with the rest of the bar as poets clambered onto chairs and hopped from table to table, spinning their stories for the patrons and passers-by. We bullied Pollux onto putting on a show of his own, and laughed and pounded on the table as he stood, wobby but true, on a chair he'd swindled and recited a poem, brash and bold, filled with perfect iambs and rhymes and the sweet, pure voice of a true poet. I caught one word in ten, but it seemed to be the story of

a battle and two lovers on opposite sides of the fray -- and when it finished, the crowd shouted their praise, Pollux making a flying leap from the stool where he'd stood as Castor and I caught his arms before he could stumble into any other patrons.

I zoned out of the performances around us, somewhere into it, as Myena and Castor and Pollux cackled their way through teaching me as many Rhysean swears as they could think up, increasingly ridiculous bard taunts that far strayed outside of the realm of casual use by the end of them. Pollux tried to teach us the opening lines of his poem, reaching over and trying to form my mouth into the correct shape of the vowels as I stumbled and giggled and lost my mind, slowly, slowly.

I snapped back into reality as the tavern went near-quiet around me for the first time since Cassian and I had entered. I tensed, my head whipping around, until I spotted -- them. Night-sky dark, tightly coiled hair just above their shoulders. Posture somehow stick-straight and hunched at once -- fiddling with a lyre on a strap across their back. Humming, humming, turning it into a song.

Leander.

The odds that we ended up in the same tavern, again, the odds that they were playing -- it was fate. Destiny, prophecy put into motion.

They seemed to be a crowd favorite. The tavern held its breath for one moment, two, as I caught the edges of Cassian's conversation, still at the bar with Io, as in the corners patrons slammed down glasses and chairs slid and footsteps came and receded like waves.

Then -- they began to sing.

And I realized I'd heard the song before.

It was the same one they'd sung at the Eligidanim Traem -- the prophecy song. The one about me -- Cassian -- us -- and *them*. Leander. I could feel it in my soul, a like calling to like. *This was the poet. This was the poet. This was the poet.*

Orpheus and the fates and the muses, every iteration of musicality and loveliness in this world or that. *There will come a soldier, there will come a poet, there will come a king, who will right this broken world.* And I was so lost and I was so enraptured and I turned, wildly, taking in the bar and this moment where the world leaned in to listen and --

Cassian's eyes were fixed on Leander. His mouth hung, half-open, his eyes wide. I'd spent some seventeen-fold more years away from Cassian than I had with him, but he was so *known*, to me, like no one else I'd ever met, and I could put a name to every emotion that flickered across his face as their song continued and the world hung still to create some semblance of balance. Awe and overwhelming joy and that soul-deep ache of

something too great to put name to, the kind of emotion you can't catch as it sits on the tip of your tongue -- the kind that sears the moment into your brain and brands it into your skull, a perfect rendering of bliss. There was all of that, in his eyes, and sadness, too, and -- just for a moment, a second, split across his face -- hurt. And -- fear.

He was a boy caught up in a poet's song. And I thought -- I thought -- he saw what I saw. *Here we are*, I wanted to shout, *soldier and poet and king, Cassian, here we are*, but then the world snapped back into motion and Io was still beside him, laying a hand on Cassian's arm, and Cassian turned back into their conversation.

All the same, though, I leaned into that hope. I knew Cassian, and I knew he saw what I saw. Heard what I heard. As the song ended, I tried to force my way through the crowded bar, trying to make my way to Leander to say -- something wild and improbable, *come with me, please, please let me take you home* -- but it was crowded, and they were a favorite of these rowdy patrons, and Pollux was grabbing my arm and pulling me back before I could get too far as Cassian stood and told me, *Ilyaas, we're leaving*. Io had disappeared, slithered away, and with my wits only half-about me, the next conscious realization I had was when we were outside the tavern and the night air hit my face like a bucket of water.

The tavern. And the poet, I said, keeping to Rhysean in an attempt to convince him I was sober enough for rational thought. *We've found them, haven't we?*

We have, he responded. Where I was dazed, my voice still halfway somewhere-else, his was firm -- mind always running, always grounded, the wheels in his head clicking away in mechanical order. Logic, logic, logic. *I know what needs to be done.*

And I thought that was it, the end of it -- Leander the poet, to be announced at the Favorite's Feast the next night. Io and his sharp-edged charm could stuff themselves, and we would *work this out*, the soldier, and poet, and king. We would deal with the queen, and I would make Cassian good -- *because he already was*, away from his mother. Away from the queen, away from when he had to step up as Princeling.

I could see the conclusion, blurry as the road to liberation was.

But -- but, but.

Here's the thing about Rhysean: there are no gendered pronouns. Verbs are conjugated by *I, you, they, we, we-not-you, you-all*. There are no gendered pronouns, nouns or adjectives that acquire special endings based on identity.

And so when I said *the poet, we've found them*, I meant English-them, Leander, singular-they. *The poet*, even without an

article, *the* prophesied poet, the one we'd have waited the ages for.

And when Cassian responded *we have*, he thought I was referring to Rhysean-them, English-he -- *Io*. He thought I meant a poet, not *the* poet, a poet he could manipulate and guide as he needed. And in Rhysean, there was no clarification.

But I didn't know that.

And I wouldn't find out until much too late.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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Episode 30: Chosen

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode thirty: Chosen.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: The Favorite's Feast was just as rowdy as the one that marked the opening ceremonies -- but this time, the favorite poets, rather than Cassian's friends and soldiers, sat at our table. The night before, the four of us - the two kings, Cassian, and I - of us had stared at a list of all of the bards to try and make this cut, scrambling to remember anything about their performances, deliberating, Cassian and I sending hesitant glances to the kings with each name we dared speak. He and I had agreed on Leander - it was the first name that had left my mouth. He'd backed me up, even against the stare his mother sent him.

The gesture was undercut by how the next name he said was *Io*, but all the same. I'd stiffened at that, but the queen had nodded in a way that dared me to open my mouth and contradict her, and I wasn't looking for trouble. I was looking for Cassian and I to say whatever had needed to be done. I was looking for us to do what was required of us until the moment it was time to call Leander.

At the feast, the chair to Cassian's left sat empty still -- but it would be filled by night's end. I wanted to throw up every time I looked at it. *Leander, Leander, Leander, please*, went the thrum of my heart, but the anxieties that stopped me from doing much more than picking at my food threatened to resolve themselves by having me throw up on the banquet table if this wasn't all resolved soon.

All the castle had turned out -- the king was the most sober and least senile I'd seen him in months, the queen at high attention, surveying the tables below her dais like a bird of prey. Servants bustled around, refilling goblets and plates as the poets demanded -- this was a feast for poets, after all, which meant they would drink our castle to flood if we opened enough bottles. The friends and lovers and patrons of the poets we'd selected sat close by, the rest of the court ogling them somewhere behind, and out on the castle steps and in the city square there would be another party, a commiseration of bards

who hadn't found their way into favor and a revelry of common folk who indulged in this last night of lanterns and splendor and songs spun gold. Even Rhia had been allowed downstairs, though she sat at a table far from ours -- I could just make out the tilt of her shoulders some seven tables away, near the other end of the grand room. No amount of whining to either Cassian or Rhia to have her near, rather than shoved into a corner of the room, had been met with anything other than a *this is the way things are* -- but all the same, I was glad she was near.

Even if, beside her, I could see Iolo, and worried at the trouble that she could make.

But those were small rebellions. And grasping at straws was better than grasping at nothing at all.

Leander sat at the far end of our table. Io sat three seats down across from Cassian. I tried not to read too much into that.

As always, with poets, the longer the feast dragged on, the more chairs were scraped back and the rowdier they all got, a mix of drink and unfiltered *life* that hummed through their veins. I don't know who first broke the silence, who first started to sing, but it was as if a dam had suddenly burst, for then the room was carried upwards in echoing songs that climbed to outdo each other, a cacophony of noise and a flurry of movement.

I took my chance, in this chaos, and rose to find Leander.

But by the time I reached their spot, they'd disappeared, another poet among the crowd. I grimaced, frustrated, but promptly slid on a smile as a large hand clapped my shoulder and I turned to face a laird and his poet of choice, both bowing and prattling on in western-Rhysean accents at speeds that moved much too fast for me to more than half-comprehend.

I spread my hands wide and trotted out a practiced sentence, *I'm sorry, I don't understand*, and watched the dim of disappointment filter across their eyes -- I took the reprieve to slip away, farther into the crowd, looking for the only poet that mattered. *Leander, Leander, Leander.*

There -- a glimpse of them near the back of the room. I began to shove my way through the crowd -- *gods damn it, why did it seem like every poet had taken to the floor the minute I needed them all to sit down?* A tray hit the floor, somewhere behind me, and glasses shattered, a collective startled scream rising up from the people around it as they jumped away and tugged at their hems. I whirled around, hands already sliding past each other, reaching for magic, to see what had gone wrong --

And there, across the room, I saw the queen talking to Io. Their heads were bent together. Io was nodding, looking solemn, looking like he was about to bear his fangs in ugly victory.

It didn't take an ounce of premonition to know what she was saying. What announcement was coming. My heart sunk, right down through my chest and into the floor.

But Cassian was not a part of the conversation. Cassian sat in his seat still, talking with some of his guard.

I saw my chance. A last grasping at straws to make things right -- to lift up Cassian and I, to break away from the queen, to shut Io out from whatever destiny lay before us.

I gave up any hope of subtlety. I sprinted for Leander.

And caught them -- near-accosted them, in the back of the room. It was as I grabbed their wrist and they shot me a nervous expression before sinking into a bow that I realized how few words I had -- my brain blanked, precious seconds wasted.

Seanil poeta, I managed, after far too long -- *you are poet*. I pointed across the room. *Seanom rex. Ilt. Noc. Et Cassian*.

We are kings. You. I. And Cassian.

They froze. *We don't have time for this*, I wanted to shout, and began to tug on their sleeve. They yelped, tugging their arm back -- but I saw, all the same.

The veins on their wrist -- the ones that're a green-blue on me, purple-blue on Cassian -- shone faint gold.

It was my turn to freeze.

You -- I whispered, in English. It was them, I realized, beyond any shadow of a doubt. The feeling in my heart wasn't a longing, but a calling -- they were right. They were *it*, the poet, the one that would save us all.

This prophecy was not a role to be chosen, to step into and create. This was a predetermined fate -- and Leander, Leander was a part of it.

Their eyes went wide. And before I could do a single thing, they ran from the room.

Wait -- I called, in English, useless and dumb. I started after them, still shouting, *wait*, before a summons rang down from the high table.

I turned.

On the dais stood Cassian and the kings -- Io by their sides.

The last of my hope died in my chest.

Cassian made the announcement. *We have found our poet*, he proclaimed, his years of public speaking paying off as his voice boomed and fell, rang confident and true.

But -- whispered the voice in my head, *but* -- even as he called out for me, even as I, dazed, took my place beside them. The soldier and poet and king, this false trio we were. Io extended a hand to me, and I, not knowing what else to do, took it, clasping his arm as he looked at me with triumph in his

eyes. His mouth twitched. *But -- said the voice in my head, as the people in the hall fell to their knees, as I found Iolo's face in the crowd, still seated, her eyes saying, wrong choice, Eligida.*

What had I promised? I would find the poet and make it right, I would break from the queen, I would turn Cassian true. I would wait, no matter the lives it cost, for the poet.

I had found the poet, all right. And now they were gone -- and in their place, Io from the Far Shore, a snake and a problem and a lie.

Rise, said Cassian, in his king's voice. His tyrant's voice. Here are your soldier and poet and king. Here are your saviors made whole.

Somewhere out in the world, Leander was running. I'd met them before. I'd made all the wrong choices, it seemed -- and now it was time to pay the piper.

Somewhere out in the world, the Fretim gathered, and yet two of its members stared down at me from the crowd below -- Rhia and Iolo -- with a reminder of how little I'd done.

Somewhere out in the world, the true king sat, and they were not on this throne and not on this dais.

Here are your soldier and poet and king, said the tyrant-kings, and I did not have the words to confront that lie.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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Episode 31: You are not the King.

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode thirty-one: You are not the King.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I left the party early. Io was swept up in an odd mix of sincere and bitter congratulations, Cassian and I along with him, but I could feel bile building in my throat and I didn't trust myself not to throw up all over some laird's shoes. There's a poison to having fucked up that badly. It sits in your stomach and turns your blood to rot. Somewhere in the world, Leander was running, and somewhere in the world, the real king sat, and maybe that did make me the solider or maybe I was nothing more than the Girl Who Starts It All, and I would be slain as the tyrant I'd become.

I'd believed in it all. *Gods*, had I believed in it all.

So the second I could break away, I stumbled from the hall, made for my room as fast as I could. I didn't even know what I would do when I got there — pack? Climb onto the roof? Lie facedown on my bed and sob? — but I had to go — somewhere. I was only halfway to the staircase when I heard the grand old doors open and slam shut somewhere behind me -- then harried footsteps, then Cassian, calling out, *Ilyaas, wait, Ilyaas.*

I whirled around. Anger suddenly filled me, roiling in my stomach, as the consequences of this feast hit me like a bus. *Do you realize what you've done?* I shouted. *They were right there -- Leander -- why would you choose Io? Why would you pick him? He'll stab you in the back the second your eyes close.*

I tried -- he said. There was some level of desperation in his voice, his eyes ablaze with something between fear and hope. *I told her about Leander, but Io --*

Her. there was only one "her" he meant, and this was English, where gendered pronouns were clear as day. *Her* meant the queen. She was scared, I realized. Scared, because she'd realized, long ago, whatever prophecy this was painted her as the enemy. Rhia's words came to me: *let me tell you everything I know: she fears he is the reason she will lose her crown.* And here she was, trying to manipulate fate. Trying to make Cassian a hero to save her soul.

Io is not the poet. I growled. *You are not the king.*

He recoiled as if I'd slapped him. *Ilyaas*. It hurt. The way he said my name.

Cassian. I said. Softer. *Cassian*. *We can set this right*.

Set what right?

This world, I snapped. *We can help the people and make this something better. We can bring magic and peace -- we can stop the fighting, we can work with the rebels -- we can -- fix this. All of this. All that this has become.*

I could see the shift the second I said the word *rebel*. The gears in his head began turning once more. Logic, logic, logic. Maintain his position. Maintain what he had. He wasn't wrong if he never admitted it.

God, I'd done the same thing.

There's nothing to fix, Ilyaas. Not like you're suggesting.

Cassian -- louder. Anger had returned.

You forget yourself, he snapped. *I am the king here, and you are sworn to me, and Io has been made our third.*

This isn't what the prophecy says --

Fate and the creation of destiny are the same. This world belongs to those that seize the future before them and ask themselves why not? A prophecy is a role anyone can fill. It's just an archetype of a hero.

Archetype. I'd taught him that word. We'd laughed about it, late one night, and I'd been so wine-drunk I'd had a hard time

remembering it. *Tip of my tongue*, I'd slurred, and he'd laughed. I'd felt it in his chest. I was lying on his stomach.

Archetype he'd lilted, testing out the word on his tongue. I'd giggled at how he'd said it. It didn't belong here, not in this fight. A good memory in the midst of all this venom.

I made my first mistake in my next words. *I took Leander's hand tonight. Their veins were gold through their wrist. Is that an archetype or a destiny, Cassian?*

He froze. *What?*

It hit me, then. No matter what we said of Leander, no matter what he felt, he would keep Io. Because Io was a promise. Io as the poet reaffirmed his belief: anyone can fill this role. If Io was the poet, if heroes were laid out by a prophecy for anyone to fill, if fate was something you walked into rather than had thrust at you, then he was everything he dreamed.

King. Hero.

Tell a lie. Turn it into the truth. Bury the shame so far down it no longer stands.

Hadn't I been doing the same thing?

Cassian, I said, more hesitant now. *They're magic. A different magic, like me.*

He shook his head. *No one has golden blood. It's impossible. It was a mistake of the light, or they painted it to turn you just like this. Fates are not predetermined, Ilyaas.*

What he meant was this: *let it be impossible. Please see what I mean.*

He was a pawn as much as I was. And I was frustrated with myself and him and Leander, running, and Io, gloating. *Do you think what we're doing is right, Cassian?* I asked, cold.

What? This wasn't what he had been expecting.

I was on a roll now, all my fears coming boiling out. *How many people have we killed? How is that right? How can we not call ourselves tyrants, Cassian, after all we've done?*

We're fighting the terrorists, he snapped. *Those that would raze Rhysea to the ground --*

Then why haven't they? I cried. *They stay outside of a village and the village thrives because of it. We're the ones that burn their corpses and march through like marauders. How the people's faces sour as we ride through, come to vanquish the fretim that has helped them. It seems that we're the tyrants, you know, it seems we're the unwelcome ones --*

How do you know that word? Fretim? He said suddenly. *The rebels. Fretim. I did not teach you that word.*

I froze, panicked. Rhia taught it to me, late one night, brows furrowed as she chased her *let me tell you everything I know's* with *but don't tell them, don't let them know*. Only the rebels called themselves the *fretim*. Everyone else was too

scared of the word. Called them *rebels* or *tyrants* or nothing at all.

That was my second error.

Don't change the subject, I snapped. *It doesn't matter.*

Yes, Cassian said, his voice low. I'd forgotten, under all we'd become, that there still existed that soldier-prince from the first day in the rain, when he'd kicked my knees out from under me and forced me to kneel. Yes, *it does. Who taught it to you? A soldier? One of the poets?*

And then something sparked in his eyes. No, he said. Softly, aching. Hoping he was wrong. *Rhia.*

But it wasn't a question.

I don't quite remember what happened next. Flashes of conversation, flashes of expression, but more than anything, I just remember the searing desperation I'd felt. I begged. That I do recall. I made him promises about our future, that I'd be anything he wanted -- *We can change this together, we can create our own destiny, far away from here. Just -- let. Rhia. Be.*

I thought he would listen. An expression crossed his face -- something I still can't put a name to, no matter how much I'd known him. Maybe it was hope. Maybe it was understanding. That's what I'd thought it was at the time -- so I kept talking.

If prophecy is an archetype, you can choose something else, Cassian -- we both can -- we can let someone else fill old shoes

and we can just create something new. We can take down the kings, we can rule, we can --

Then his countenance changed again. And this time, I'd seen grim resignation enough times to know what was coming before he opened his mouth.

It was the same face he always made before he gave the order to burn the rebel's bodies.

I'm sorry, Ilyaas, he said, and then, in Rhysean, as he pulled his sword from his waist, he called for guards. Find the Menstrana de, he shouted. And bring her here.

I panicked, tried to run past him back to the great hall -- but he put out his sword, and mine was still up in my room, calling, thrumming, making my head off-kilter. *Peril anil*, I snapped, my hands swinging wide, and Cassian flew back across the room, sword clattering in one direction and him going in another.

From the doorway to the great hall, two guards emerged, dragging Rhia with them. Four more came behind them, and one cursed, loudly, in Rhysean, as they took in Cassian on the floor, my hands still glowing.

Put her down -- I yelled, my Rhysean rough. I didn't know a spell to separate them. Wasn't sure how to use my magic without hurting her. If I could disappear them all -- if I had known how --

But then there were more -- all around me -- and I realized, suddenly, that Cassian had hit his head, that Cassian wasn't conscious, and one of them said, *what do we do? What do we do?* And it was Hildegarde, their armor on, still on duty, that stood up from where they'd knelt beside Cassian and said, simply, *knock her out.*

And -- I lifted my arms to try and push them all back, but someone moved faster than my hands and my breath. A sharp pain hit the back of my head, and I was gone.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at patreon.com/backagainpodcast, where you'll gain access to bloopers, annotated transcripts, episode sneak-peeks, and more! If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. I'm so proud of you for making it through your worst days and for finding happiness where you can. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Back Again, Back Again: No Confusion Between Us

CW: This episode contains descriptions of violence, mild gore, and emotional manipulation/abuse.

Abigail: Hey guys. Before we get to the listener limericks and the episode, I want to take a moment to address the June 24th, 2022 Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe versus Wade. This decision stripped away the right to have a safe and legal abortion.

Everyone should have the freedom to decide what's best for themselves and their families, including when it comes to ending a pregnancy. This decision has dire consequences for individual health and safety, and could have harsh repercussions for other landmark decisions.

Restricting access to comprehensive reproductive care, including abortion, threatens the health and independence of all Americans.

Learn more by visiting [podvoices dot help](https://podvoices.org). If you're able to support others, please consider donating to abortion funds. I encourage you to speak up, take care, and spread the word.

Before we begin the finale, we have a little listener limerick! If you, too, would like a funky little limerick

written for you and read out on the show about an (arguably) pg-13 topic of your choice, you, too, can go to Ko-Fi.com/BackAgainPodcast or click the link in the description to jump directly to the page. This limerick is for Miguel, about fishmongers.

I knew of a fishmonger blue,
When sad, on fish bones he'd chew
His friends soon caught on
And with the help of a prawn
They got him some therapy, too.

And - onto the finale. In show context, this one is a little heavy, so please check out the content warnings at the end of the episode description before listening. Stay safe.

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode thirty-two: No Confusion Between Us.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I thought Cassian was good.

Gods. I thought Cassian was good. I thought I could change him, that with enough *time* I could pull him away from the idea of being king. I believed - I *did* - that if we spent enough nights under the stars and midnights getting drunk and telling stories and talking about the future that one day he would wake up and have a Zuko redemption arc. I daydreamed about that, him and Rhia and I running away to the *fretim* and raising an army. The details were never too clear. Sometimes Cassian was my soldier, sometimes Rhia became the poet, sometimes the *rex et poeta et soldat* were people entirely. Once we met Leander, they were always there, too. The important part had been that we were together, and we were free, and we were happy.

But -- that dream was always going to be sepia-tinged, a nostalgia for something that never was.

Because Cassian spent seventeen years preparing to be king. And when you base everything you are around that, it takes more than a little bit of *traem* the drink and *traem* the feeling to give it up.

When I woke up, I'd been barricaded into a room that was not the one Rhia and I shared - they'd been smart enough to not put me in my own room, where I had my sword and my armor and my wits. This one was a spare: an empty bed frame and a dresser and nothing much else. There was a window, but no gables on which to climb out onto. There was a door, of course, but the fact that I didn't see any locks on my side of it made me think that there were just a great quantity on the outside. Did they have guest rooms for political prisoners? It wouldn't've surprised me.

The back of my head ached from where one of the soldiers had hit me. There was a crick in my neck from how I'd been slumped across the floor. Maybe it was a stupid thing to remember, amidst all the chaos of that day but -- all the same. There it was.

More importantly, my hands were bound behind me. I was gagged. I'd used my magic to hurt their prince -- I was something feral, now. They were taking no chances with me.

It wasn't much longer before the door creaked open, and a soldier stuck his head through. *Get the kings*, he said in Rhysean. *She's awake*.

I struggled to my feet. *I will not face the queen on my knees*, I resolved. *I will look her in the eyes. I will not bow*.

The door unlatched. The queen swept in, a retinue of soldiers at her back. Io stood off her left shoulder. Cassian,

looking haggard, stood off her right. Both of them were dressed in finery -- midnight blue and gold. Io had drawn tiny golden stars beneath each of his eyes with what looked to be the same stuff Cassian and I smeared across our faces before battle. A crown sat across Cassian's brow, crooked as always, but listing farther to one side than it ever normally did. Io looked like he was meant to take up space. Cassian, for the first time since I'd met him, looked like he wanted to disappear. He wouldn't meet my eyes.

Io did, though. His face was almost impassive -- almost. Something sparked in his eyes -- not confusion or anger, but... amusement.

Snake, I thought, but didn't make a sound, determined not to lose my dignity so soon. *Rhia*, I wanted to ask. She wasn't in here with me. *What did you do to Rhia*.

Would asking betray my affections? Was I already too far gone for it to be a surprise?

The queen cleared her throat.

The day will go like this, the queen said. *We will remove this gag. We will untie your hands. You will speak in Rhysean if you say anything at all, so the poet understands. You will not call any magic to you. If I hear a language other than Rhysean, the Menstrana de Eligida will lose a hand. If you raise a weapon or whisper magic against anyone in this castle, the Menstrana de*

will lose an eye. She does not have many of either, and if we make it that far, the consequences will be much worse. I say this in the language of the book so that there is no confusion between us. If you claim to not understand my meaning, I will beat the insolence from you. But of course - there will be no violence as long as you do as you are told. Nod to show to me that you understand.

I nodded -- what else could I have done? -- and Hildegarde stepped forward, pulling the gag from my mouth and untying my wrists. If it had just been me on the line, I don't think I would have stopped myself from letting out a perfect Rhysean *fuck you* -- but the queen had Rhia, and I had cost her enough already. I kept my mouth shut.

What would it have been like for Rhia, if I'd never come? She would have trained another girl to speak English after her; she would have stayed friends with Cassian. Maybe she would have run away with Iolo, or spent every night of her life on a rooftop or in a tavern until she grew so old she couldn't climb onto the trellis to do either.

I'd already cost her enough. So I sucked in a breath, put on the politest tone I could manage, and said, in Rhysean, *I... I would like to see Rhia, my king. Please.*

Io smirked, a flicker across his face and gone. Cassian stared resolutely over my shoulder.

The queen's voice was light. *Not yet. There are many things to be done before we could entertain that idea, Eligida.*

Like? I fought to keep my voice calm, even though I wanted to snap the word, lift my hands and call the magic and force them to take me to Rhia. I tried to meet Cassian's gaze again -- *gods*, amidst all of it, I was still sorry I'd hurt him. Even though the larger part of me said *look what he's done, this is why you're here* -- you don't stop loving someone. Not after one betrayal -- or two, or three. It went both ways, the love and the hurt. He wouldn't look at me -- that's how I knew he still cared. I wanted him to look at me -- and there was my tell. Game over.

Like the presentation of the chosen three, said Io, stars flashing as he bared his teeth. *To the public. There is still a festival in the city, soldat, until we stop it with a word.*

Captain, the queen said, and Hildegarde straightened.

King.

Help the Eligida dress. Ensure that she does not do anything... irrational. Meet us down by the steps.

A soldier brought in a dress, and all but Hildegarde vacated the room - Cassian still not looking at me, Io staring, and staring, and staring. She closed the door behind the party with a sick *thud* and turned back to face me, one hand loose on her sword. Watching to be sure I didn't -- I don't even know.

Where could I have run to that wouldn't have hurt someone else? There was a girl downstairs somewhere that I loved, so much, and she was my other tell. Game over.

I dressed. I pulled the pins out of my hair, little gold things with flowers on their ends, and tried to rearrange it all into something at least half-put together. I made a half-hearted attempt to ask for my sword, trying to quell some of the tension that throbbed in the back of my head -- though most of it, I was sure, was from where Hildegard had absolutely clobbered me.

Which she hadn't seemed particularly put out about, either.

I was denied my sword. A false one was handed to me in its place - bare of any design, too big for me and unwieldy in my grip. I supposed they knew that if they allowed me back to mine, there was no way that I'd be letting go of it again - and there would be no way for them to pry it from me as only I could lift it. I took the false sword, oddly balanced and cheap, and followed the kings and Io down the stairs.

We stood on the steps of the palace, the very place we had glowered down from after riding back in from that first battle. Then, my arm had ached from my stab wound as I'd raised my true sword -- the queen had forced me to perform then, too. There was a nice narrative symmetry to it, I suppose. I was just as useless the second time as I was the first.

See your rex et poeta et soldat, the queen said. They will right this world.

As if we weren't the ones that kept it broken.

We raised our swords. And in the crowd, I caught the eye of Iolo, anger dark on her brow. Storms in her eyes. No -- worry. Worry in her face. *Rhia*, it said. *What has happened to Rhia?*

She'd been there when Rhia was dragged out. Had she fought back against the soldiers? Probably not, if she was out there instead of sequestered away to the annals of this castle. Had Rhia seen them coming, the soldiers, and had a sick sort of premonition as to why? Had she used her last moments before they reached her to whisper fiercely to Iolo to not fight back? To kiss her hand?

Rhia, Iolo's eyes demanded.

And I didn't know when I'd have a chance to tell her again -- if ever. I was theirs for as long as Rhia was theirs. I had done her enough harm -- but I didn't trust the queen to keep her word. And I didn't trust myself to keep her safe -- I would never be their perfect soldier. And if there was a chance that I could stop Rhia from suffering because of it --

I cringed, thinking of queen's words. *If you claim to not understand my meaning, I will beat the insolence from you.* My only wild thought of how to let Io know Rhia was in trouble - it was not English, it was not magic, it was not violence, the

three things that would make Rhia hurt, but I knew - I *knew* - that what the queen had meant was, *do not step over the line, or I will force you back across it*. If I was caught and I could not sell this lie, this was insolence.

But I healed fast. If it came to that, I would be fine. With my free hand, eyes locked onto Iolo, I made the gesture that I'd had made at me a thousand times, now. Shoulder-shoulder-out, fingers crossed like a broken promise, small as I could, pointed at Iolo. *Rhia*, I mouthed. *Help her*, I couldn't risk mouthing. *Send us help*.

I didn't know how else to make her understand that I was asking her for a favor - a plea, a call to the *fretim* - without the sign, a gesture of giving away power. Of asking for help. Meant to say, *please fix this*, meant to say, *you are as brave as I wish I was*.

And then Cassian and Io were lowering their swords so I rushed to, as well, missing Iolo in the crowd for just a second and hoping, desperately, that she got my message. That she understood, and was seeking help, and that they could get Rhia out.

But Iolo wasn't the only one that had seen. The queen's gaze locked onto my hand as it trailed back down to my side, and I swallowed hard.

The ceremony dragged on. Io got laurels, I got laurels, Cassian knelt before his parents and promised things that the sound of my heartbeat drowned out. There's a particular kind of sick that bubbles up inside of you when you know you're waiting to get the shit slapped out of you, and I was far from certain that I would be given a chance to explain myself. The second we were out of the sight of the people in the courtyard, the queen yanked me back by my arm and struck me across the face.

I stumbled, hitting my knees hard - I hadn't expected retaliation that *fast*. Cassian shouted something that sounded like *mother* -- he hadn't seen the gesture I'd made to Iolo.

What did you think that would do? She hissed. *Who were you trying to signal?*

I brought my hand up to my lip to gently prod where the queen had struck me, and winced when my fingers came away tipped with blood. Her stupid fucking *rings* --

That's going to leave a mark, I muttered in English, too low for the queen to count against me. In shitty Rhysean, I asked, *how will you explain this to the people?* Something more like -- *this, you will tell people?*

Training accident, she said smoothly. *However, I would not worry about you having to explain anything to them for quite some time. What were you trying to do with your ridiculous act of dissent?*

To give respect, I managed, the words thick around my split lip. *To the people, my king.*

Hmm. There was a note of warning to her voice, and I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth, bracing myself for violence. I And then, *that is not your place.*

She flicked her hand and swept away, her dress swirling as she whirled around and started down the stairs. Relief hit me like a train – that was the end of it, that had been the end of it – until she turned, again, and cocked her head.

Well, eligida? Aren't you coming?

I stood, shakily, as I was divested of even that stupid shitty sword, then trailed the queen down the stairs, down the hall and to a stairwell that curved and curved and curved until the thought of sunlight had been left a few hundred feet above us.

The dungeons.

The -- cellars. Not the real dungeons -- those weren't kept in the same building as the royal family, too much to lose -- no one wanted a murderer running around the palace – but a small set of cells, special for those the kings wanted to hide away.

Rhia lay crumpled on the floor, dress tangled around her knees, one arm thrown over her head. It was cold down here, different than the well-heated palace above us. It was enough to

prickle your skin -- Rhia already ran cold. I knew if I could grab her hands, they'd be ice.

But Rhia. She'd let me see Rhia. A reminder? Of what I had to lose? I stumbled forward, but the queen held up a hand to stop me. I didn't dare to push my luck.

Menstrana, the queen said. Rhia didn't stir -- her chest rose and fell -- she was alive. *Menstrana de*.

As if she were in a trance, Rhia sat up, slowly, flowers still caught and crumpled in her hair from the feast. She stared straight ahead, seeing everything seeing nothing, and then finally, finally, looked towards us.

The queen motioned for the guards to open the cell door, and the bits of relief curdled in my stomach. *Menstrana de, do you know what your Eligida did?*

And then, as if they'd practiced -- as if this was a thing they did every day, torture and torment and blackmail -- Hildegard and Tavius - the captain of the guard and the lieutenant, people I'd shared meals and campfires and starlit nights with -- grabbed Rhia and pinned her to the ground. Tavius put one knee on her chest, grabbing her wrists. Hildegard slammed Rhia's head to the ground and held it steady, one hand pressing against her forehead, the other one on her neck.

The queen drew a long, slender knife from the folds of her dress and stepped towards Rhia.

Both of our reactions were visceral. Rhia slammed her weight around, bucking like a wild horse, trying to throw Tavius's weight from her chest. I lunged forward, hands sliding past each other so they began to glow, but Cassian caught me around my waist and then Io was in front of me, wolf's grin, stupid fucking gold-painted nails digging into my wrists as he slammed my hands together and down.

Careful, soldat, he said. Cassian was silent.

The queen stepped closer. Rhia's sob was muffled. I was not noble and I was not brave. *You aren't supposed to hurt her,* I screamed. *It's me. It's me. I didn't break your rules.*

Her words were soft: *raise your hand, Rhia loses an eye.* She knelt, refined, and positioned the thin blade over Rhia's face.

That wasn't what you'd said, I begged. *It's insolence - it's me - it wasn't anything, I didn't mean anything -*

And the queen, almost delicately, slid the blade into her eye.

You know what screaming sounds like. You don't need to know what a face looks like, after that.

And maybe you know, somewhat, what apologies feel like, bundled up in your chest. But I could not, in that moment, remember the stupid *fucking* Rhysean word for *sorry*, and saying it in English would have cost her the other half of her sight.

I retched. Io swore and shoved at me, disgusted - I stumbled, slamming to my knees. The queen wiped the blade along Rhia's dress and stood. She glanced down at me, still fucking serene, and the barest wisp of a smile slid across her face as we both realized I was kneeling before her.

So you do know deference, then, she said, in English. *Good little soldat.*

Rhia whimpered - god, no, it wasn't a whimper, it was - worse. So much worse.

But - now my hands were free. From where I kneeled, I breathed in, and out, and slid my hands past each other. *Furums et peril anil*, I whispered, and threw my arms wide.

The room caught on fire. The queen, Hidlegarde, Tavius - Cassian - were knocked backwards, slamming into the walls. I had a path to Rhia. I lunged towards her - *break*, I willed, grabbing at the chain around her ankle, but I didn't know the Rhysean word for it, and the magic refused to respond. *Goddamnit, break.*

The wood beams of the ceiling were on fire. The queen's dress was on fire. Hildegarde was on fire, and Cassian was back on his feet, moving towards Rhia and I in the perfect untouched circle around us. *Break*, I tried, in English again, voice cracking. *Break, please.* Rhia wasn't conscious any longer - god, I couldn't blame her, but we were almost out of time, because I

didn't know what Cassian would do, but she was half my head and

-

*Rotar, Cassian said, so quietly I almost didn't hear him.
To break. Rotar.*

I whipped my head around. I thought I'd known every expression he could make, but this one was - new. It was - uncertainty. It was - his heart cracking.

Get her out, Ilyaas. She deserves more, he said. But remember who we are. Come back.

I stared at him for what felt like forever. I knew, if someone had held a mirror up before me, I'd have seen his expression reflected back on my own face. I didn't know how he could be so obtuse - to just miss the point. To look at this, everything burning around him, and think, *This is wrong, but I am not the thing that must change in it. This is wrong, but I am not something that needs to be fixed.*

Seventeen years, though, is a lot of conditioning to undo.

Come with me, I tried, finally. You told me once that if I'd asked, you'd follow me anywhere. So come with me.

And then - noise, from upstairs. An alarm bell ringing. We both stiffened as guards began to shout, as footsteps pounded down the stairs.

Don't be foolish, Ilyaas, he said, and drew his sword. You know that wasn't what I'd intended. Get her out, before I realize how stupid we're being.

Rotaril, I whispered, and the chain snapped. I heaved Rhia to her feet, and began to pull her up the stairs. Cassian didn't look away as we climbed.

-

The rest of our escape went something like this: the *fretim* had broken into the palace. Iolo found me, Rhia limp in my arms halfway up the stairs - she and a group of others had cut their way through to us, and then she had an arm around Rhia, too, hauling her upwards until we reached the entryway. The great stairwell was behind us. All was chaos - a battle in the palace, a battle in the heart of this place I called home.

We were almost to the door when I felt the pull in my gut - it wasn't a *pull*, though. It was a *yank* - someone grabbing hold of my stomach and twisting. My vision blurred - it took all my effort not to double over, to keep Rhia upright.

The ringing moved into my chest.

My sword, I gasped, not for surprise but for lack of breath. We have to go back. We have to go find it.

Iolo swore at me, trying to keep moving, but I was rooted to the spot. My blood hummed, and all noise of battle faded into a sharp, clear whistle.

I turned around.

Flying down the stairs, *my sword* in her hands, was - a girl.

Her nose was bloody, a snarl marred her face - and as she slammed the pommel of my sword - *my sword*, the one that was *too much* for anyone else to touch, *too much* for anyone else to pick up - she whipped her head up. Her eyes locked onto mine.

The world froze. The world burned.

There was only one reason I could dream up for why she was able to do that.

Soldier, my brain supplied. *King*.

And then everything was moving again, Iolo shouting at me to *move*, to *take Rhia and move*, and the girl was flying towards us, glowing, glowing, and tossed me my sword. I fumbled for it, barely catching, and she grinned, sharper than a knife's point.

This is not how Rhia intended for us to meet, Eligidida, but it will do. she said in Rhysean, and then she drew two short swords from her back and set herself into fighting stance. *My name is Callia. Let's burn this place to the fucking ground.*

Abigail, as the Outro: This has been season one of Back Again, Back Again. Season two will begin November first, 2022.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Back Again, Back Again, is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're thinking November is an awfully long time away, stop by on the first of every month for a bonus episode - or check us out on Instagram and Tumblr @BackAgainPodcast or on Tik Tok @AbigailElizaWrites - I'm going absolutely nowhere. If you feel so inclined, you can donate to Back Again, Back Again on KoFi at [Ko-Fi.com/BackAgainPodcast](https://ko-fi.com/BackAgainPodcast), or click the link in the description, where, if you leave an arguably PG-13 topic in the description box, I'll write you a terrible little limerick in return. Of course, you'll also win my eternal affection and gratitude.

This show wouldn't have been possible without more people than I can fit into the timepsan of Pierce Murphy's Nightingales, which was, of course, retrieved from [FreeMusicArchive.org](https://freemusicarchive.org) and is licensed under an attribution license, but I'll try. To Chloe, my soldier, for letting me borrow your mic when we first came to uni and for being so unapologetically proud of the things that you create that it makes me want to yell about mine, too. You are brilliant. Half my heart belongs to you. To Ella, my king, for always rewatching Narnia with me and all of the bread-and-cheese dinner nights.

Thank you for everything, and everything, and everything, but especially all the times you played the guitar in our tiny little dorm room. Terry living was not ideal living, but you made it something great. Thanks for signing another lease with me.

To all of the card-carrying Milk Bilbo members. I love you.

To Nat, for knowing more about BABA lore than I do and playing a not insignificant role in this show's November revival from the grave. Your flower crowns are the coolest ever. To Ira, for the fanart and for being one of the first BABA fans, and Joy, and Rose, and Cas, and Cup, and Zoey, and Jupiter, and Em, and MJ, and Aerin, and Halo, and Morgan, and Annie, and Isaac, and everyone, everyone, everyone who has taken the time to listen to this silly little show and yell about it with me. Another thank you to everyone who has made fanart or written fic or made pinterest boards or tumblr posts or playlists. I cannot believe that this is real. I can't believe this is my life.

I know we've passed the longest day of the year, now, up in this northern hemisphere, and sometimes that feels like a condemnation, that steady march back towards the dark. But it is still summer, now, and I hope that if you feel your throat closing at the thought of tomorrow that you can tip your head up towards the sun or the stars and find at least a second of peace in this day. You have made it through before, and I am so proud

of you for facing it again. I love you, I love you, I love you.

I hope you have a wonderful day.

Back Again, Back Again: Three Times Rhia Ran Away (And One Time She Didn't)

-

CW: this episode contains references to physical abuse, the death of a loved one, and mild descriptions of blood.

Abigail, as the voice on your preroll: Hello! Before we begin today's episode – which I'm so excited for – if the length of the episode doesn't give it away, I got a little carried away with this one – we've got a couple of listener limericks! If you, too, would like a funky little limerick written for you and read out on the show about an (arguably) pg-13 topic of your choice, you, too, can go to Ko-Fi.com/BackAgainPodcast or click the link in the description to jump directly to the page.

This first limerick is for my dear Chloe, regarding floor time – because it's required.

Floor time is good for your health

Equivalent to spiritual wealth

Back to the floor

When you're feeling poor

To arise as a much better self.

This second one is for ever stalwart Em, regarding plants:

Although on the streets they do fine

They die in my house all the time

Their standards are high

And I'm just some guy

Houseplants sure do love to whine.

Thank you both so much again for donating!! And – onto the episode. There’s a couple of content warnings for this one, so please check out the end of the episode description before listening. Stay safe.

[FX: voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is “Nightingales” by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro – Back Again, Back presents... Three Times Rhia Ran Away (And One Time She Didn’t).

[FX: Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Rhia was eleven when she first snuck out from the palace.

Eleven is a big age, even if no one talks of it as a milestone. At eleven, Rhia felt she knew more about the world than she did at seventeen. At eleven, she thought she could pluck the stars from the sky and swallow them whole.

At eleven, she fought with Cassian over something stupid – something borrowed without permission or stolen without repercussion, something said over dinner or in a lesson or whispered during what was meant to be private study in the library with the intention of casual cruelty. The fights were not new. They were both children *of the palace* in a way that was unique, even among the other children *of the palace* – children of soldiers or cooks or courtiers that took group lessons apart from the prince and the

teacher-in-training – and the two, because of their isolation, were raised more akin to siblings than simple friends. Fights were constant, and messy, and often felt irrevocably hurtful, in the moment. They never were. They both hated the other, a little bit, more than a little bit, in the way all siblings do when they are eleven and can pluck the stars from the sky, but the virulence only occasionally bobbed to the surface. Most of the time, it drowned in a begrudging but fiercely protective love.

This time, though whatever *thing* the fight had been over was lost to the annals of time, the way Rhia reacted to it was not. She was certain Cassian had started it, and she was certain she was justifiably bellicose in the way all siblings are when one sibling (or close-enough) pushes the other's buttons just one too many times. All of the small injustices Cassian had committed against her over the years, calling her names or barging into her room or stealing her coursework bubbled up, and up, and became a part of whatever this current fight was about.

She did remember this: she was in Cassian's bedroom. Her ears burned hot with anger. She punched him in the teeth.

Rhia had one glorious second of divine vengeance, Cassian, doubled over, hands clutching his mouth, before she realized what she'd done and how she hadn't actually wanted to hurt him, not like this, not this badly, but this was not an action that she could take back. His face crumpled; tears began; Rhia could not undo what she had done so instead she turned on her heel and ran through the palace, heart pounding, feeling sick and sick and sick. If she was selfless, she would have run to tell her teacher what she had done and find Cassian help. If she were brave, she would have told the kings – but Rhia was, in that moment, neither. She did not run *towards* the kings or her teacher – the one that taught

her and Cassian the language of the book, the closest thing to a mother than she had, who would have been the most understanding to the ways siblings fought, for she'd grown up beside the queen just as Rhia did the prince – but *from*, maybe *away*. Chest tight, hands shaking and her vision half-blurred from her own tears, she flew towards the stables, and out past the dozing stablehands, and out, and out, and out the back, into the woods, along the paths best illuminated by the stars.

It would have been cold, if she'd slowed down enough to notice. It would have been dark, a forest late at night, if she'd not been so distraught over what she'd done.

Unfortunately, being eleven, even when you felt powerful at eleven, meant that you were still at the mercy of your own actions and the punishments of adults. Being able to swallow the stars did not mean that they would not burn your throat on the way down.

She stumbled to a stop at the edge of a small village, situated somewhere between the end of the woods that surrounded the back of the palace and the the dregs of the metropolis that had dumped itself before the palace steps. She could not remember the last time she'd been on her own. She wasn't sure if she remembered the way back home. She wasn't sure, the image of Cassian, tears falling freely and blood on his fingers still burned into her brain, that she could bear to go home.

Maybe, Rhia thought to herself, finally starting to feel the cold, *I can live here now, for forever*. There was a friendly sort of glow casting flickering shadows along the small buildings, and Rhia followed them towards the village heart.

She hadn't even made it to the center before a small girl materialized at her side. She was a few shades lighter of a brown than Rhia, and her hair – almost the same shade of

brown as her skin and curly – was pulled up on to the top of her head in the sort of messy way that Rhia knew meant she'd done it herself after haughtily refusing the help of an adult.

She squinted at Rhia in the flickering half-shadow. Rhia, unsure, halted before her. For a terrible, horrible, second, she was certain the girl was going to say, *why did you punch the prince in the mouth?*, but instead, the other girl said – *you're not from here.*

Rhia blinked. How did the girl know? She'd lived in the palace the entire life and she didn't know all of the people there by name or face. And somehow the other girl just *knew*? About *her*?

She straightened. *Maybe I am.*

But you're not, said the girl smoothly. It wasn't an accusation. She almost sounded – amused. Intrigued.

Maybe i'm visiting someone who lives here. Maybe I'm the cousin of someone who lives here.

But you're not, the girl insisted again, and smiled in a way that was almost too clever for an eleven-year-old. Maybe while Rhia had been waiting to pluck the stars, this girl had been learning to steal them, instead.

I could be.

You're not, the girl repeated. *Because if you were, you'd be sitting with every other child in this village* – she spat the word *child*, as if she didn't include herself as part of the denomination, though Rhia was almost certain she was – *listening to my mothers act stories.*

Was *that* what was going on in the village center? Voices did play on the edge of her hearing, echoing around corners rachously and joyfully.

Rhia folded her arms. *Then why are you* – she said *you* in a way that, in no uncertain terms, marked this girl as part of the aforementioned *children* – *not listening, too?*

The girl rolled her eyes. *Because*, she began, the word *because* so exaggerated that it, in no uncertain terms, marked Rhia as a *fool* – *I live with them. I can recite this story word for word. It's boring.* She held up a finger, cocked her head to listen, and then said, in perfect cadence and pitch with the echoes from round the corner, *I will never go with you, foul beast! I will fight against you till my very last!*

Rhia stood, shocked. The girl shrugged. *I did not say they were clever storytellers. I just said they acted stories.*

So you wander around in the dark instead?

The girl sighed. *I was looking for something more interesting to do.* She said *was* in a way that, in no uncertain terms, told Rhia she'd found it. *Where are you from, girl-at-the-edge-of-the-dark?*

My name is Rhia, she said. Her stomach twisted in a way that made her nearly throw up at this girl's feet when she thought of the palace, and then her not-quite-sibling, and the reason she'd run away in the first place. Suddenly, she wanted to apologize to Cassian, even if it meant he punched her in the teeth back. Could he forgive her, for this one? She hoped so. He'd done worse things to her. She'd do worse things back, before they were both grown up. She just didn't know that she could face the kings and her teacher. *I'm from – I'm from.* She swallowed. *My name is Rhia. I ran away from my house.*

The girl squinted into the darkness behind her. *Without your parents?*

I don't have parents, stupid, Rhia snapped.

The girl huffed, *Everyone has parents. Just because you ran away doesn't mean you don't have parents.*

No, Rhia insisted. *Not me. I'm the teacher to the eligida-to-come. I don't have parents. I have guardians and teachers.*

The girl went very, very still. She seemed to notice, for the first time, Rhia's frilly dress and slippered feet. *Oh*, she said, very carefully. *Ah. Well. If you've never had parents before, you won't think mine are strange. I think they'd like to meet you.* Then she grinned, almost deviously, up at Rhia. *My name is Iolo, you know. It is nice to meet you, Rhia.*

–

Iolo seemed to take great pleasure in interrupting the performance of her mothers. She barged into the middle of the circle the children sat in, dragging Rhia by the sleeve, and announced, gleefully, *this story has to stop, right now! I've found a lost girl!*

One of her mothers, who was down on her hands and knees pretending to be some sort of animal, sat back onto her ankles, looking more than a little put out. Iolo's other mother, who had been brandishing a very large stick like a sword, dropped it to the ground, coming over and falling to a knee beside Rhia. She was impressively tall, this woman, towering over Rhia when on her feet – who, even at eleven, was heads and tails taller than Cassian and was fast creeping up on passing her teacher – but she had a kind face and gentle eyes. *Iolo*, she called, her voice low and smooth, *go home and bring back a blanket. She's frozen through.*

Iolo jutted out her lower lip, then opened her mouth wide as if she were about to make another proclamation, but her first mother, sat back on her heels, made a warning

humming sound that had obviously occurred enough that Iolo snapped her mouth shut and trotted towards a small house at the far edge of the fire.

What is your name? Asked the other mother, the one before Rhia, burying Rhia's cold hands in her big ones. *Are you truly lost, or is our child putting on her own performance?*

Rhia squirmed, unsure how to answer about whether or not she were *truly* lost. On the one hand — yes. On the other — she thought she might want to stay lost a little longer, if it meant the kings' anger at her punching Cassian turned, instead, to a mild panic at her absence that would make them far more likely to forgive her. She hadn't been hugged by either of them for quite some time. She could almost imagine it, though, them leaping down from their horses and wrapping her in their arms. *We'd been so scared*, the king would say, and he'd swing her around like he'd done to her and Cassian when they were young. *We're just glad you're alright*, the queen would say, and smooth down her hair to kiss her forehead.

Those were daydreams — of that, she was certain. But she could almost — almost — picture them coming true. *I'm not lost*, Rhia insisted. The second mother shot her a look.

Then where are you from, wandering around in the dark and the cold like this? Where are your parents?

Always this question, Rhia thought, a spark of annoyance and a spark of shame stinging in her gut. Had this second mother seen her daydreams about not-quite-parents in her eyes? Was that what this is about?

She doesn't have parents, Iolo announced grandly, nearly tripping over the giant patchwork blanket she'd gathered in her arms. When she said it, it didn't sound sad or defiant. It sounded like something that made Rhia interesting.

The second mother's brow furrowed, and she gave Rhia a second pass. Her eyes caught, too – on her dress, not meant for doing work in, on her shoes, wrong for the weather wrong for the woods, on her hair, which hung long and unbound and unsuited for work. Rhia knew she was a creature valued for her intellect, even at eleven. She understood, more in feelings than words, that she was also a creature valued for the power and the wealth she represented. *Look what we have made. Look what we can maintain.* All at once, the pieces — or something close to the correct pieces — seemed to come together in the Other Mother's mind, and she stood abruptly. *That's it,* she said, and caught the gaze of the first mother with a nod.

First Mother took up the call. *All of you, to bed, to home, now. If I hear from your parents that you didn't go straight home, next time, I will drag you by the scruff myself.*

The children groaned and laughed and did as they were told, clambering up and taking off in different directions. Iolo dumped the blanket on top of Rhia's head, having to throw it a bit to make it land, and Rhia fumbled blindly in the dark until the mothers took pity on her and helped her find her way out again. Iolo shot her a slick grin. The first mother tugged on her ear. Iolo yelped and tried to look more respectable.

Us too, I think, hummed Second Mother. *To home. And for you —* this was said towards her daughter — *to bed. This can be sorted out much better indoors and away from this wind.*

—

Inside was cozy and, save for the sleeping loft above, about as big as Rhia's bedroom back home (*home*). The mothers put on a kettle and made them all tea, then sat Rhia down

at the table as Iolo hovered near the ladder up to the sleeping loft, trying to make it seem like she was actually about to go to bed.

Rhia explained, as eloquently as she could, her role at the palace, her place with the kings, and the path she'd taken to get to the village. When they prodded her as to *why* she'd left (*did they hurt you? Did something happen to the palace? Is everyone safe?*) Rhia squirmed and squirmed and squirmed until she finally blurted, shame burning her ears, *I punched the prince in the mouth.*

Iolo, who was still hovering, let out a large, cackling laugh. First Mother turned around sharply in her chair and hissed at her daughter, *if you are not asleep by the time I count to five, I will write you a list of chores so long you won't see your friends for a week.* The girl squeaked, turning red, and practically *leapt* up the ladder, bounding up the rungs and throwing herself onto the heap of blankets. First Mother watched for a silent count of ten, twenty, making sure her daughter's face did not reappear, then turned back to face Rhia. Out of the corner of her eye, Rhia watched Iolo slide around and peek over the edge. *Shhhh*, she mouthed, and stuck out her tongue. Rhia, for some reason, had to resist a blush. She turned back to the mothers.

First Mother had gone a bit green. Rhia couldn't be sure, but it almost looked as if Second Mother was trying to swallow back a grin that would have matched her daughter's. *Well*, managed First Mother, finally. *That is quite a predicament.*

Second Mother, without hesitation and without any cloying notes of pity, asked, *will they hurt you when you go back?*

Rhia clenched her teeth so hard together she thought they might crack. *I don't –*

Would they? *Would they?* She and Cassian had both been hit before. They had been stupid, made bad decisions, embarrassed the kings in front of dignitaries or the court or were too loud or too opinionated – especially Rhia, especially Rhia. She was starting to become more and more aware of the slight but important differences between herself and Cassian. She was starting to understand what it meant to be *special* but not *royal*.

Mostly it meant lonely. Mostly it meant that even if you were eleven and could swallow the stars whole, eleven still meant you were at the mercy of adults.

She'd deserved it. When she had been, before. At eleven, Rhia didn't doubt this.

She wouldn't've mind if Cassian hit her back. That felt fair. That felt even. That felt like a resolution to a fight between not-quite-siblings. That was the only way for such a thing to end without insidious resentment seeping in seeping in to their relationship.

If they hit her back, instead of Cassian, that wasn't making things even. That was a punishment.

I hit the prince. What happens – is only fair.

Second Mother's mouth opened, lip curling, a second away from snarling something. First Mother, still green, put a hand on her arm. She shot a look at Rhia, and then a second one at her wife. *Watch your words, dear.* She turned back to Rhia. *You are welcome to stay the night. It isn't safe to go out into the dark again. We will talk again in the morning. About – how to get you home. Or – if you would like to stay here.*

None of this was right. Rhia's stomach twisted, but she had been raised to be polite and to not question when adults gave her directions, so she finished her tea and accepted the clothing she was offered to change into for sleep and climbed to the loft to lay down

where Iolo was certainly, definitely not asleep. Rhia flopped down, back to the girl, and pretended not to feel when Iolo rolled over and kicked her. *Hey.*

Downstairs, the mothers whispered in harried but hushed tones. *I will not* – Second Mother snapped, voice rising, before her wife *shh'ed* her and they both fell back into quiet debate.

Iolo kicked her again, and when Rhia didn't respond, shutting her eyes tight and pulling her quilt up around her ears, Iolo poked and poked and poked at her back until she finally rolled over.

What? Rhia snapped. She was worried about tomorrow and was worried about the way the mothers were talking, because it was most certainly about *her*.

Hey, Iolo said again, still grinning sharply. Her eyes sparkled, almost as if she were – pleased. *Are you coming to stay with us?*

No, Rhia ground out, then hesitated. *I – I don't know.*

You should. Everyone else here is boring. You'd be more fun to talk to.

Rhia ignored the very different way that turned her stomach over. *I can't, though. I have a job to do,* she finally said. *I was chosen for something important. It wouldn't be right for me to disappear. It wouldn't be fair to my teacher – or the kings.*

It was the right thing to say. It was the way Rhia had been raised to think. But she couldn't help but let herself imagine, for just a second, what that could be like.

Late that night, there came a knock on the door. Rhia pulled herself out of a warm, bleary sleep and stared through half-lidded eyes down towards the doorway to see Second Mother talking to two figures, mostly blocked, in the doorway. When she turned over her

shoulder to glance up the loft, where Iolo and First Mother still slept beside her, Rhia finally realized who they were.

Her teacher, dressed for travel, a hand firm on the much smaller shoulder of –
Cassian.

He stared plaintively up towards her in the loft. If she squinted, his mouth looked a bit swollen, but – he didn't look angry. And the kings were nowhere to be seen.

She finally registered that all three of them were looking at her, so she unwrapped herself from the blankets, shivering from the cold, and came to join them down on the floor. She hesitated before them, unsure of where to go, until Cassian broke forward, slamming into her and wrapping her into a hug. *I was so worried about you*, he said, squeezing tight. *Why did you run?*

The words, now that he was here, nearly stuck in her throat. *I'm sorry*, Rhia managed. And then the dam had broken, and they poured out, and out, and out. *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry* –

His hug stiffened, just a little bit. Then her teacher was kneeling beside the both of them, and tucked each of their hair behind their ears and cupped her hands on each of their cheeks. *It's important that you forgive each other. You will face much in this life, and it will be easier if you do not forget to lean on the other.*

Rhia's stomach flipped. Cassian turned to her and said, without hesitation, *I forgive you.*

He was always better at letting go than she was. At least, when they were young. She didn't know what to say to that, so pulled him back into another hug.

Second Mother still looked on with sharp eyes. To Rhia, she said, *you still do not have to leave. If you are afraid of what they will do.*

Her teacher did not get upset at this. She was always better at staying calm than the rest of them. *The kings do not and will not know. She is safe, with us.*

She nearly sagged in relief at that, barely hearing as her teacher reminded her to thank her host.

Gratinoc, she managed, and gave her very best bow. *Tell your daughter goodbye from me, please.*

–

You didn't tell them? Rhia finally asked, in the language of the book, after she and Cassian had climbed into the back of the discreet service cart among bags of grain and salt and settled in, wrapped together in a shared blanket as they were jostled back towards the palace. On the cart bench, their teacher sang quietly to herself, an old Rhysean song that Rhia could almost trick herself into remembering from when she was a baby and still had parents. *Them*, she didn't have to clarify, meant *the kings*.

Cassian ducked his head. He smiled, a little shyly, and Rhia noticed with a start that he'd lost one of his teeth. Shame reignited in her chest, spreading to her face spreading to her ears, before he seemed to notice and shook his hair in front of his face. *It was loose*, he said instead. *The tooth. I'd been too scared to pull it out.* Silence. And then, *I almost did. Tell them. But It's like the Menstrana said. We have to protect each other. Before anything else.*

Before anything else, Rhia had agreed, and ducked closer to him to stare up at the stars. *Before anything else.*

–

Rhia was fourteen the second time she ran away from the palace.

Before anything else had lasted for two years, fighting kept to a minimum as it became the world against Cassian and Rhia. They learned how to climb out onto the roof without getting caught and kept a map of the night sky they'd bullied one of the castle scribes into making on Cassian's wall, thick dark lines drawn between different stars to make constellations just their own. Even though Rhia was no longer allowed to speak at dinners when matters of state were being discussed, Cassian listened to her thoughts when they were alone and shared them in her place the following night. She pretended not to care when Cassian was gradually, gradually pulled from lessons on language and literature with her and instead routed down into the arena, where he trained with Hildegarde, the Captain of the Guard, a woman of few words and high expectations. She wasn't particularly fond of Rhia (though Rhia wasn't particularly fond of her), and called her a *nuisance* and *distraction* when Rhia was just far enough away for Hildegarde to gain plausible deniability at being out of earshot. They were harsher words for the few she spoke.

That was fine. That was fine. She'd heard him, stronger now for being a prince and so confidently *himself*, say back, *she's my sister. She's not distracting me from anything*. And that was enough. Hildegarde was part of the *everything else*, part of the thing they were meant to be united against.

And then her teacher died.

It was sudden. Rhia did not get a goodbye or a warning or a burial day. She came to the library one day, did her lessons and walked Cassian to the arena as usual and came back for more lessons and more studying, then the next – she and Cassian walked into the

library, and Hildegarde was waiting in place of her teacher. She pointed to Cassian and snapped her fingers. *You are mine now. Come.*

What about lessons? Rhia asked, annoyed at how much her voice pitched up at the end of the sentence. *Where is the menstrana?* She would not approve this. She lectured to them both about the importance of history, of stories, of love. She did not think people were meant for war and nothing else.

Hildegarde did not pause as she continued her sweep towards the door, catching Cassian by the shoulder and pulling him along. *Your teacher is dead.*

She slammed the door behind her, shaking the shelves of the library, and the space echoed like it never had when there were still two bodies to fill it.

Rhia had been taught two languages and a thousand years of history and enough poetry to regale a court for a fortnight straight. She had never been taught how to grieve. So even though every part of her ached with this, pain so great it nearly sent her to her knees, clutching at the desk nearest her, she could not lay out the process in a neat ten steps and so did not ever begin at all.

That was the second night Rhia ran away.

Where to go, when the last time you left the palace you were eleven years old? The same place, if you are a creature of habit, if you are a creature searching for some semblance of comfort or consistency or home when one of two people in the world who loved you without condition or expectation were dead. The same place, if those two people had not betrayed you the first time and your three-year-old escape route still lay intact. The same place, if you somehow managed to find your way back to the village you'd visited not

by the path you'd stumbled through in the woods but by the hypnagogic cart ride you'd taken back with those same two people.

Rhia did not quite realize where she was until she was on her knees and the door was swinging open before her.

Iolo had grown. Her hair was longer, the curls pulled looser by the weight of them all. She'd gotten thinner – Rhia remembered with a start the drought, the disaffected conversations between the kings during the hottest weeks anyone alive remembered. The queen – *The livestock are dying. It's getting harder to source meat.* The king's response – *add another lottery to make up the deficit. Pull from one of the towns. Someone will be honored to feed us.*

It was the cooler days, now. They'd passed the longest day of the year. Rain came steadily once more. But it was clear that while she'd nearly forgotten the struggle, with her plate never empty and her washbasin always full, Iolo's body had not.

Iolo's hand curved into a claw around the doorframe. *You.*

I didn't know where else to go.

Why didn't you stay?

It wasn't the question she'd been expecting. *I had family. I had duties to attend to.*

Her fingertips were losing their color, she was pressing so hard at the door. It was an odd thing to pick out, among the thudding ache in her chest, but she couldn't stop staring. *And now?*

I still have duties, Rhia said, hesitating for only a second.

That was enough. A flash of something like grief stumbled across Iolo's face, and she softened. Iolo offered her a hand to help her to her feet. *Stay until they call for you, then.*

Inside, she was greeted after only a second of confusion by a noticeably older First Mother. Like her daughter, the three years had not been kind to her. Her wife was not inside.

Iolo took her out the back door and into their garden. There, a small, wizened sapling twisted and fought for life.

It did not take Rhia long to understand. *Who you lost*, Iolo said. Her voice shook. *They are not gone. They are in the ground. They are in the trees. They are in the earth and air and sky. They are the magic and they are the mundane and they have been made anew.* She swallowed, hard. *They are not gone. They are not gone.*

She turned and went back inside. Rhia stayed, staring at the place one of Iolo's mothers had been laid to rest, and finally began to cry.

It would be two days before she returned back to the castle. The first night, she couldn't sleep, staring over the edge of the loft towards the door, wishing that, like three years before, a knock would come to bring her home. As the night grew longer, she held out hope for Cassian – that he would not forget the promise they'd made to their teacher on the day of her death *The two of us against the world. The two of us against the world.*

Cassian did not come. And Rhia did not allow herself to miss that, too.

–

Rhia did not run away, the rest of her fourteenth and fifteenth years, but she did an awful lot of leaving. She did not run, but she traded the palace for nights with Iolo, near-dawns with Iolo, helping her mother (Madrugada, she learned, was the name of the woman she'd long referred to as First Mother) with the cooking, the animals, the upkeep on the house. She did not run but reached out to catch story nights, where Rhia took part in the plays for the children, and as Iolo leaned against the shadowed houses, rolling her eyes, she

was able to pretend that there was not another life that she was running from. There was a slight but important difference between *running away* and *running from*, and Rhia took every opportunity to tell herself that she was *running from*. The difference was – *running from* implied an eventual return. Just – while she was away, there was no isolation, no broken vows, no Cassian no Hildegarde no rest of Cassian's friends, the boy named Tavius who'd inserted himself by Cassian's side and the girl who seemed to make it a game to say less than Hildegarde. No kings. Just this – goats. Birds. A girl with sparks in her eyes and sharp teeth and a low and raspy voice. Shows. The village children she sword-fought with sticks and a surrogate mother and Iolo, on the night of Rhia's fifteenth birthday, pulling her back before they stepped into the firelight and kissing her more softly than she'd ever thought she deserved.

She'd floated high on that kiss, let Iolo delay and delay and delay her return until dawn, past dawn, at which point Madrugada and Iolo surprised her with small honey cakes and jam and kissed her forehead to wish her many happy returns. Rhia wandered back to the palace, long since having perfected moving through the trail in the woods, and scaled the trellis up to her room.

Cassian was waiting for her, legs folded beneath him as he sat on her bed. In his hands, he held a lumpy but painstakingly wrapped package. Rhia froze when she saw him, unsure of how he would react, but he wasn't angry. Maybe a little sad. Maybe a little distant. Rhia couldn't remember the last time they'd been alone. Before their teacher had died. Before everything had fallen apart.

Happy birthday, he said, proffering the gift. *I was here at midnight, but –*

I was celebrating. Maybe her heart hurt, a little bit, at those two simple words, but he was the one that had left first. He did not deserve her pity, not on a day like this where the taste of honey still sat thick on her tongue. *With my friends.*

What friends? Rhia did not think Cassian meant to sound as dismissive as he did, but she still flinched. He opened his mouth, lips just starting to form a *sorry*, before it snapped shut again. He cleared his throat. *I meant, what people do you know outside the palace?*

Just some people, Rhia said, trying to sound nonchalant, heart suddenly beating fast at the thought of having broken some unknown rule. She'd never been expressly forbidden from leaving as she did, but the kings had a bad habit of retroactive proclamations. She and Cassian, back when they were young, had both been on the receiving end of consequences created from them often enough to recognize the habit. She did not know how much Hildegarde had made him forget of that childhood and whether or not *us against the world* still applied – he was more *prince*, less *brother*, every time she saw him. It wasn't just the way he carried himself or the newly forged sword – a year early, tradition was sixteen – that hung by his side. It was the things he said. It was the very makeup of his brain.

Well. Fifteen is a big age. I'm glad you were celebrating. He thrust the package out towards her. *Speaking of. This is for you. Hildegarde says everyone should be able to defend themselves. I know you don't know how to fight with a sword, so –* he shrugged. *I had it made for you.*

Rhia unwrapped the package. It was a dagger, beautifully made, the blade engraved with stars. She searched, for just a moment, along the blade for the constellations she and Cassian had made at twelve.

They were not there. The stars were randomly affixed in their positions.

Thank you, Rhia said blandly, falling back on drilled politeness. As everything with Cassian these days, it shouldn't've hurt when things were not as they used to be. But all the same.

He stood. *Sorry to go. I have training. Many happy returns.*

And she was alone again. Without hesitation, Rhia set the dagger on her desk and climbed back out the window.

–

Rhia was sixteen and a half when she began to run *towards* instead of *from* palace life.

Iolo had gotten a job serving nights at a tavern nearby. Rhia liked to visit, to tease her and leave tips at her other tables (she refused, even during bad times, anything akin to charity – no money, no food stolen from the palace kitchens, no clothing that Rhia, taller and broader than Iolo by no small amount, had outgrown, but Rhia had gotten cleverer about leaving these gift behind with time). She loved the music – both the hired bards and the ones that showed up uninvited and played unprompted. She loved being around this many people that were not stuffy or focused on hierarchy. She loved, even as much as she complained about it, the cheap beer that Iolo snuck her in her free moments. At sixteen, she especially loved the name of the tavern – at least, the name as Rhia interpreted it. *We choose our own destiny.*

Here, she met the *fretim* for the first time. Iolo caught her around the waist one night as she was leaving, a tray perfectly balanced in her free hand, and murmured into her ear. *Be back tomorrow night. There's someone for you to meet.*

Rhia's heart had skipped a beat, and she'd nodded. The next evening, at her usual table, a girl that couldn't've been any older than she was sat with two friends, weapons on the table and determination in their eyes. There was something compelling about the girl – the way she sat. The small row of braids that curled around her left ear. The sharp angles created by where she'd pulled her wavy hair away from her face.

She tapped the edge of her twin swords as Rhia sat down and grinned. *I have an offer to make you, menstrana de eligida. My name is Callia.*

[FX: The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Back Again, Back Again, is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're thinking November is an awfully long time away, keep on stopping by on the first of every month for a bonus episode – or check us out on Instagram and Tumblr @BackAgainPodcast or on Tik Tok @AbigailElizaWrites – I'm going absolutely nowhere. If you feel so inclined, you can donate to Back Again, Back Again on KoFi at [Ko-Fi.com/BackAgainPodcast](https://ko-fi.com/BackAgainPodcast), or click the link in the description, where, if you leave an arguably PG-13 topic in the description box, I'll write you a terrible little limerick in return. Of course, you'll also win my eternal affection and gratitude.

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. I'm so proud of you for making it through your worst days and finding happiness where you can. The light-soaked days are coming. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.

(Bonus) Bonus Episode: FOR FUTURE ILYAAS

Abigail, as the intro: Hello hello! Surprise!! There's a bonus episode today. Pour one out for Ilyaas coming back from Rhysea.

A few things - we have merch now!! You can check out the link in the description for how to get to that! It is so sexy, Nat made it.

Next - we have a limerick!! This one is for stalwart Em, who asked for a limerick on cake -

*There once was a baker named Perry
Who cakes were laden with sherry
He said it cooked off
His patrons would scoff
But it did make the cakes light and airy*

Of course, if you, too, would like a silly little limerick about an (arguably pg) topic of your choice, you can donate on kofi at ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast and I will write you a definitely silly, likely terrible little rhyme, too.

Finally - stick around after the credits of the episode! We have a lovely little trailer from Mx. Bad Luck that just - oh my god, guys, listen to this show.

Love y'all!! Have a wonderful rest of your day!!

[FX: Recording cuts in - it is the usual quiet background hum.]

Ilyaas: hey, there, future Ilyaas - this is your reminder that just because you've been eighteen before doesn't mean that you should waste it your second time around. Not many days now, not many days now until eighteen is properly gone for good. Go do something exciting and ridiculous for me. Bye.

[Recording cuts out.]

[FX: Recording cuts in. There are bells - and - birds? In the background of the recording. Maybe she's in a park.]

Ilyaas: - fuck, okay, I just remembered that word. It's *caligan* - fuck, no, *calligan* - don't forget, don't forget.

[Recording cuts out.]

[FX: Recording cuts in - it is the usual quiet background hum.]

Ilyaas: Hey, there, future ilyaas. I know tomorrow is two years. I know. I know. I'm not going to stop you from putting your fucking armor on and turning out your lights right before midnight and hoping and hoping even though we both *know* that armor is not fucking *pyjamas*, and you're going to be so sore, but i am going to remind you that last year you woke up and turned eighteen for the second time and did not see Rhysea and

that nearly fucking broke you so. This is me, in a rational mind, talking to you, irrational Ilyaas of hope and tomorrows, and asking you if it's really worth the heartbreak. You're moving across the country, babe. You don't have time to waste the day being sad. You need to pack your shit and take the rest of it to goodwill. Ten days until you're gone. Keep moving. Keep moving. Don't you dare pause to cry.

[Recording cuts out.]

[FX: Recording cuts in - it is the usual quiet background hum.]

Ilyaas: Hey there, future Ilyaas. This is for when you inevitably remember that I left you this recording after making bad decisions out in the city and taking the bus home with less than all of your faculties intact. Your first reminder - babe, I put your headphones in your bag. Yeah, they're the wired ones, because I'm sure sober me would not want to trust you right now with the bluetooth ones. Are they in? Are you sad? That has to be why you're listening to this. Good. Here's a few reminders - one - remember what everyone always says about prophecy children and outlasting your utility in another realm. You're not the exception, babe! If it happened to Lucy Pevensie why do you think it wouldn't happen to you!

Two - no, traem did not taste better than whatever you've been drinking. It was gross. It was so gross. And also - you sound like an idiot. Stop flipping your t's to the bartender and hoping that someone asks where your accent is from. What are you going to tell them if they do ask? You sound dumb. Stop it.

Three - he did not love you. He did not love you. It was justified. You did what you had to do. Do you hear me? You did what you had to do to make that world right. If it spit you back out right afterwards, it's because the gods of portal magic agree that you did the right thing. He got what he deserved. You are not a villain.

Drink some water when you get home. Go to bed. Please don't stay up any later. We have work tomorrow.

[Recording cuts out.]

[FX: Recording cuts in - there are echoes and people talking.

Harried footsteps make their way around in the background. Maybe it is the Seattle subway.]

Ilyaas: *fuck* - that song Cassian used to sing when he was little - I thought i remembered the chorus but the Link was crowded and i didn't want to be that shithead singing on the train car - but then that dude came in blasting his music from his fucking boombox and now I can't remember - it's gone again. It's gone.

[Recording cuts out.]

[FX: Recording cuts in - there is wind hitting the mic. The sounds of a city - cars, people, footsteps - are heavy in the background. Ilyaas sounds a little out of breath.]

Ilyaas: This one isn't even for future Ilyaas, this is for me right now - that wasn't him. There was no way that's him. He's dead. He's dead. You watched him die. He can't be here. There's no chance he lives in this city, too. Don't wish him back here. Don't do it. It wasn't him. It wasn't him.

[Recording cuts out.]

[Recording cuts in - it is quiet.]

Ilyaas: hey, there, future Ilyaas. Here's your daily reminder: you're not going back. You're not. Stop trying to hold on.

[Recording cuts out. There isn't anything more.]

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ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast, where if you leave a topic in your donation box, I'll write you a ridiculous little lymerick to read out at the end of the show! OR - guys, we have merch now!! Nat @ natdrinkstea on tumblr did some absolutely gorgeous commissions - plus, of course, silly banners and logo stuff that I did - that you can check out in the description of the episode. Chloe, does it slay?

If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

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Mx. Bad Luck Trailer!!!

''BAD LUCK'' BY SEBASTIAN VALENZUELA FADE OUT

INT. APARTMENT

CAT PURRING

MICAH

What could go wrong in a month. 31 days. 744 hours. Less than that if you have a decent sleep schedule but i've yet to meet anyone who does, so im gonna assume you all to be insomniacs or solar powered robots until proven otherwise. Does anyone actually leave their house before 8 pm anymore? I'm not leaving beforehand to check so that can remain a mystery for now. I'd argue 8 pm is a world known time to collect energy drinks and any source of caffeine before settling down and pretending to do those papers due last month. But that's beside the point.

FOOTSTEPS, DOOR OPENS

SALEM

Talking to the cat doesn't count as therapy y'know?

MICAH

No, but he's a good listener

SALEM

I don't blame you, it's been a long month. Are you ready to put an end to it micah?

MICAH

As ready as i'll ever be

SALEM

Then lead the way mx.bad luck, we've got a curse to stop- what's the worst that could happen?

MICAH

Famous last words salem, famous last words

BAILEY

Hurry up guys or I'm leaving without you!

SALEM

Times up, lets go before bailey starts messing with things he shouldn't

FOOTSTEPS

MICAH

What could go wrong in a month? Spoiler alert, the answers a lot. Like a lot a lot.

''GOOD LUCK'' BY SEBASTIAN VALENZUELA FADE IN

Stream mx bad luck wherever you listen to podcasts and join us on our journey to find good luck amongst the bad.

Ilyaas:

[Long sigh]

There's a greek word - *hamartia*. It's - a fatal flaw. If you lived a thousand lives where you started over and came into this world anew, your *hamartia* is the thing that you would fall upon every single time. For some people, it's pride, or the inability to see things in anything but black and white, or the fear of losing what you have keeping you from pursuing anything more. For others, it's always having to be right, or always having to have the last word, or never being able to speak up when it's needed most.

Mine would be this, across a thousand lifetimes in Rhysea: I could never let go of Cassian.

Back Again, Back Again: Hamartia.

Abigail: Hello hello! Before we begin today's episode, I have a listener limerick for Eloise. If you, too, would like to support the show and receive a silly little limerick about an (arguably pg-13) topic of your choice, you, too, can go to ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast - or, if you'd like to see all of BABA's behind-the-scenes content, you could check out our [patreon!](#)

This limerick is for Eloise, about talking horses.

*I know of one thing irrevocably real
Sly talking horses sure love to steal
In a rich dude's old house
They never do grouse
But instead rob the silver with zeal*

Thank you so much for your support. I hope this month sees you better, dear one.

And now - onto the episode :)

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode one:
Hamartia.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: There's a Greek word - *hamartia*. It's - a fatal flaw. If you lived a thousand lives where you started over and came into this world anew, your *hamartia* is the thing that you would fall upon every single time. For some people, it's pride, or the inability to see things in anything but black and white, or the fear of losing what you have keeping you from pursuing anything more. For others, it's always having to be right, or always having to have the last word, or never being able to speak up when it's needed most.

Mine would be this, across a thousand lifetimes in Rhysea: I could never let go of Cassian. Make us kings. Put us on opposite sides of the war. Make us common people, neighbors, make us commanders of opposing armies, make us two storm clouds on opposite horizons or birds or trees or people of any sort, of any form, and there would never not be a lifetime where I wouldn't be drawn to him.

Self-destructive and stupid as it might have been. Despite the thousand thousand things he did against me and against Rhia and against Rhysea, against the people, the entire body of people, the thousands and thousands that could have had a better

life - the parts of him that stick in my brain the longest are the moments of love. The blurry, rachously joyful ones. The soft, barely-in-focus ones.

My head on his chest. The two of us dancing on the roof. Looking up at him, half-drunk, the night before everything went to hell, his arm slung around my shoulders and his chest pressed into my back.

Mine would be this, across a thousand lifetimes in Rhysea: I can't stop loving the people I once did.

It's not a matter of not knowing how to give up. It's not a matter of only seeing the good in people. It's about being selfish and wanting things to remain as they are. For the people I love to stay by my side, to follow me anywhere, to change at the same rates as I do and grow into the same shapes that I take and for them to know my mind without my saying much at all.

And once I find a taste of that, I refuse to acknowledge that I've lost it. Even when it's - obvious - that I'm never getting them back.

Even when it's - obvious - that I'm never going back.

It's been - almost two years? I applied for university because it was expected of me. I spent hours sitting in front of a word document that was completely blank save for the admissions prompt copy/pasted across the top:

Describe a situation in which you enacted change from within your community. Describe a situation where you confronted someone about an issue you cared about. Tell us about yourself in three hundred words. What would you name as your greatest accomplishment to date? Where do you see yourself in twenty years?

Write a new ending to a nursery rhyme. Write about a teacher that changed your worldview. Who do you look up to most in this world? Why do you deserve to pay so much to be here?

How do I say - I don't know? I don't know? I don't know? I don't think I do. I don't think you'd look at any of my experiences and view them as anything other than a fantasy.

Because - how much I wish I could give up on the fantasy of somewhere better. Something better. How much I wish I could draft up a normal response to where do you see yourself in twenty years that did not spiral into thousands of hopes for Rhysea and my quiet return or end after one word: dead.

How much I wish I could convince myself that I'm not going home.

I filled out application essays. I walked the stage at graduation. I accepted admissions at a school far, far away to study linguistics or creative writing or some - languages - if nothing else, learning Rhysean gave me that much. That passion.

But that's still me holding on.

Because, god, I am trying to hold on. I keep a journal in Rhysean, but I can feel myself losing more of it with every breath I take. What happens if you don't speak a language every day? What happens if you have no one to speak it with? What happens if there are no resources, no online dictionaries, no places where you can go to look up a word or a verb tense or a usage?

It's just - gone. You forget a word, it's just - gone. For good.

But I'm rambling. This is a new space for me, and I haven't figured out how to fill it yet with words in a way that makes sense. That hasn't stopped me from decorating this tiny little apartment like I'm in Rhysea, though, from buying yards of gauze-y lace to make a canopy and hanging dried flowers and bits of parchments covered in every memory I have, every word I can think of before it leaves my brain forever - but it's stark in my very being here, that it's so *not* the place I'm trying to make it.

I've lost a bit more of myself, but still I'm holding on.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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I hope you have a wonderful day.

Back Again Back Again: What Happened After

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode two: what happened after.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: But there's still so much that you don't know, dear listener. We're just barely short one year of six, accomplished. I'm nineteen, now, the oddest thing in the world, because I'm still seventeen in the story I'm telling you but twenty-five in my head.

My point is - the point I set out to make, at the beginning, before I got caught up in longing and everything outside, is our escape. It went something like - like this: I had just met Callia, my sword in her hands, and we were - running. We were - trying to run. Forcing our way out. I raised my sword - the one she'd just *tossed me*, the one she could *hold* though no one else

I'd ever met could, and we began to fight our way out. It was as if we could predict the other's movement, almost instinctively - I could tell when she'd strayed too far to one side and wouldn't be able to cover her front in time, could send magic blasting to keep her clear. She knew my blind spots, moved faster than I'd ever be able to - and we were destroying this place that had become my home now a stranger to me - or I was a stranger in it, clawing my way free - and then we were outside, out the front entrance - the barracks were round back, this was safer, somehow - and down the steps, and into the streets.

And - we fled.

And - I wish I could say I didn't look back.

The palace burned. The fire had spread - I'd watched Iolo and another girl, Rhia between them, knock over the huge brazier that burned in the entryway and fan the flames to a blaze as a detour before leaving. As we disappeared down into alleys and shops and the underground streets, still thick with cover from the festival, people streamed out of the castle, servants and nobles and visitors and despite myself - despite myself - I looked back. Caught myself scanning the faces of those stumbling out of the castle for dark curly hair, a familiar face, a prince's crown.

If it had been Sodom, I would have been salt. I was just as foolish as Lot's wife.

Somewhere in the world, Leander was running, but we were, too, the group of us dispersing - smaller numbers were harder to follow. Iolo and Rhia and their friend went in one direction, and Callia, no mercy, pulled me in the other. I shouted - *I'm not leaving her* - and was halfway through saying it in English before I realized my mistake and tried to switch to Rhysean. Callia rounded on me, snarling, before I could finish either and slammed me against an alley wall, one arm barring my chest, the other covering my mouth.

Quiet, *eligidida*. Do you want us to be killed? You and Rhia - she started, and then a lot more that I couldn't catch, then - spotted - more - city, - something angry, angrier than the rest - and then a phrase I'd heard from both Rhia and Cassian enough to not struggle to understand it. *Think before you act*.

He'd always laughed it, a joke and warning after I'd made a terrible mistake while training. There'd never been an ounce of venom behind it. Rhia had meant it, when she'd said it. She'd always meant, *there are consequences to your actions, Ilyaas*. I hadn't listened when it mattered most, there.

Don't make me leave her don't make me leave her, I thought, but listened to her reason over the aching of my heart. I was the distinguishable one, easy to pick from a crowd, and it would be safer for her if we were separate.

Of course, she also probably didn't want to be around me then.

I nodded, Callia's hand still over my mouth, and she eased off, grabbing my arm and tugging me through the streets. She ducked behind a temporary festival stage and into the huge tent that marked backstage and *home* both for this troupe of performers, gauze-y green fabric draping the entryway.

I stumbled inside after her, blowing hair out of my face, and nearly slammed into Callia, who'd stopped just dead of the entrance to speak to two of the performers - one of whom who held a possibly-prop-possibly-real-sword like he knew how to fight, a long silver earring swaying the motion of standing. The other performer, a girl with red light cast cross her face from the stained glass lamps lighting the room, hesitated behind him, a hand on a knife through her belt.

Callia raised her hands, slowly and deliberately pointing to me. *We've come -- promised*, she said in Rhysean, the middle getting lost around her accent, which was rougher than Cassian's or Rhia's - their words were rounded in a way hers weren't. The boy's face twisted, turning to look at the girl - his partner, fellow performer, what-have-you - who'd also intercepted us at the door.

I blinked, trying to place her face. It was only when I focused on her eyes - painted like moth's wings in green and gold, boring into mine - that it clicked.

Cassian and I had watched the two of them perform, the first night we'd wandered the festival. Before it all had gone to hell. They'd played at a bunch of different skits, and we'd tossed them coins, and Cassian had taken the girl's hats in his and thanked them for what they'd made.

She'd beamed, then. There was no sight of a smile now.

Unlike that night, too, she wasn't dressed in performance white - words were the basis of any good Rhysean performance, and white clothing - a "blank canvas," helped players to move between roles, helped their voices become the thing of note - but instead a poet-sleeved rust blouse and a many-folded green skirt. She snapped something to the boy with the sword - it wasn't quite Rhysean and it certainly wasn't English, so I hadn't a clue - and he lowered his sword - which was, likely, live steel - reluctantly.

Callia responded in that strange tongue - lilted Rhysean, Rhysean turned seventy-eight degrees on its side - and the girl relaxed. She offered Callia her hand and pulled her from a handshake into a hug, cupping her face with her free hand and setting her forehead against the soldier's.

The mood changed, lifted, became rowdier and far more alive. The girl called back the rest of the troupe, scattered throughout the tent, and they all leapt into action, digging around through their storage to pull out -

Disguises. Callia had come to them for disguises.

The performer girl turned to me. *Rec-og-nize-a-ble*, she said in slow Rhysean, drawing out each syllable. *It is better if you are not.*

The boy with the earring tossed me a scarf to cover my head with, a green skirt and blouse like the girls', a shawl to pull around my shoulders. Callia, without hesitation, began pulling a huge tunic and cloak on over her own battle clothes and flexible leather armor.

I froze, bundle of clothes clutched to my chest. I realized, in that moment, that I didn't know the Rhysean words for *change* or *privacy* and, though it sat half-formed at the back of my mouth, even what translated generally to *clothes*.

Callia seemed to catch the indecisiveness on my face. *Stop wasting time, eligidida*, she snapped. *We can't be* - a word I didn't know - *here*.

I changed. Fumbled off my court clothes and tried to offer them back to the performer boy in exchange for what he'd given me, but Callia caught my arm first. *Don't be stupid.*

The performer girl smiled and offered me a bag, instead.
Rec-og-nize-a-ble, she repeated, and pushed them into my arms.
The dress. Take it with you.

Callia grabbed the girl's hands, once free, and thanked her, their eyes locked together. She said something again in that strange language, not-quite Rhysean, Rhysean laced with internal rhyme, and the girl responded - *prosperanil traem, soldat* - before pushing us out the door.

Callia turned to me, evaluating, and put one hand to my face, brusquely pushing a stray piece of my hair back underneath my scarf. *Eligidida*, she said. *Be ready to run.*

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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You are so, so very loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Back Again, Back Again: Lessons Learned Before the Eligida Came

CW: this episode contains the death of a loved one and descriptions of blood

-

Abigail Eliza, as the preroll: Hello hello hello!! Back in the month of September, Back Again, Back Again got entered into the Audioverse Awards, and I said that if it became a finalist in any of the categories, I'd release the Cassian bonus episode. I did not actually expect to make finals nor to do this episode.

But guys – thank you so so much for voting, holy shit, because Back Again, Back Again is a finalist for not one but two (!!!!) awards!!! It would mean the world to me if you voted for this show for Best Existing Production and Best Recurring Voice in an Existing Production. The link to do that, if you'd like to, will be in the episode description. Voting not only helps you recognize all your favorite shows for the stuff they've been doing, but it helps new people find the shows, as well!! So tell your friends!! Tell your acquaintances!! Tell your coworkers!! Tell your enemies!! Go vote!

Also, if Back Again, Back Again wins something, we'll not only do a four episode month the month following the awards – double the episodes! – but another bonus episode – this one, with the whole gang, very low stakes, and lots of bonding. No emotional damage.

But speaking of emotional damage – here's that Cassian bonus episode. It's a lot, so please be sure to check out the content warnings in the description.

And anyways – thank you all so so much again!! And here we go!

–

Once upon a time, there was a prince named Cassius Rex. Cassius had neither always been named Cassius nor perceived as a prince, but he'd become stronger for the change and stronger for the love he was shown during it.

This story is not about that change, though. There are stories about that and we know this one ends well – there is nothing gained from rehashing the struggle. This is more about the *prince* part – the *becoming of* and the *growing up*. You see, dear one, when he was young, his father would pick him up under his arms and swing him round in circles; when he was young, his mother read to him late at night stories of his parents' parents' parents'; when he was young, he had all of one friend who was as much his sister as his schoolmate and all of one tutor who tried fiercely to remind him that people were not made for war and nothing else.

You see, dear one, when Cassius was much younger than the seventeen he was when his world changed and he made himself into the image of a prophecy, he didn't doubt this. He didn't even try to make sense of it, to understand how people could think otherwise – how could he, when there was poetry and music and starlight? How could he, when the palace gardener tried to cut down the patch of wildflowers that never seemed to leave the roots of the great ancient tree so he lay down in them so they couldn't be destroyed, spreading his limbs as wide as he could to protect them? He'd been taught another word, then, for them – by the gardener, laughing, putting away their shears and helping Cassius pick bits of grass from his hair – *frets-flors*. (*They're brave*, they'd said, *like you, staging a*

protest to stop me). How could he have possibly believe that people were meant for war and nothing else when people had put so much divinity into things like sugar scones, when they'd created holidays like poets' nights – where the whole purpose was to wear big silly hats and your strangest clothing and eccentrically decorated masks – where the whole purpose was to share stories and laugh and make friends? There was more. There was more to life. Of course there was.

However, people are not all made from the same mold. People do not live forever, either, and so when his teacher died and he found himself spending not just an hour or two in drills but most of his days with the woman he called *ensoldat*, out of respect, though he knew her name was Hildegarde –well. He suddenly understood, though he'd never have the chance to tell his late teacher, how some people had *become* made for nothing else.

There was refuge, though, because when there are new situations and new people and an end to a nearly lifelong isolation one can always find refuge, especially in others. See, there was another boy – of course, there were many boys, these were child soldiers – but one in particular. If you put a group together, even if you train them all their life, there will always be a few that are not very good at their jobs. This boy – Antares – was not a very good soldier.

Of course, at the time, neither was Cassius.

This is the story of a prince, the first time he fell in love, and how he almost learned how to be more than something you had *become* made for. You know where this story picks up, dear one. Do not expect too much.

Their first conversation was anticlimactic. In the years that followed, Cassius always tried to remember it as something greater than it was – a way to preserve the boy he'd

known and the boy he'd loved a little more than he'd expected to. But he was fiercely logical even for his sentimentality, and as much as he tried to remake the moment in his mind, it stayed firmly put.

It went something like this: Hildegarde ran a tight ship, and breaks did not come so much in the form of *allotted periods of rest* as much as *periods of gasping for breath as she got a little fed up with their age group and shouted across the arena at one of the active and actually competent soldiers to come over so she could knock them around for a proper demonstration*. This had been one of those times – one of Cassius's new friends, a boy named Tavius who was frighteningly good at sucking in his cheeks in the exact same way Hildegarde did when she was mad, had been unfortunate enough to lose spectacularly in one of their practice sparring sessions. Cassius hadn't been surprised – though Tavius was one of the best fighters of their cohort, he'd been looking closer and closer to being properly sick into the sand all morning.

Unfortunately, his shakiness had been singled out as incompetence rather than illness. Unfortunately – or, *fortunately*, it varied from day to day in Cassius's mind whether or not this meeting had been a blessing or a curse – Cassius and Antares stood at the front, side by side despite not having talked in the four months Cassius had been there. Hildegarde, done with knocking around the other soldier in a *proper demonstration* of the technique they were meant to be focusing on, had laser-focused back in on Tavius.

Well, almost. She caught the two of them, side by side, and turned it into an opportunity. Three birds (three stupid soldiers-in-training), one stone. Pointing at Cassius and Antares, she said, *even they could have defended themselves better, and they're pathetic. What does that make you?*

Tavius, in an admirable defense of his own worth, took that moment to finally throw up onto Hildegard's boots. She'd made that glorious cheeks-sucked-in-sharp-anger face, and that was all it had taken for their cohort to descend into fits of laughter.

The boy had taken the moment to turn to Cassius, amusement rather than embarrassment quirking on his lips. *Hi, pathetic. I'm Antares.*

Cassius Rex, Cassius had said, still spitting out his whole and proper name every time for the newness of it. He couldn't fault Hildegard for calling him such – she was right, and it was nice to be an equal among his classmates, even if it came at the expense of some of his pride. *Pathetic, I suppose, to my friends.*

Bit grim, Antares said. *Cassian, instead, maybe?*

Cassius Rex – Cassian – felt his heart lurch at that. *Cassian. Yes. Cassian would be fine.*

–

There is not much about quiet friendship that cannot be found in the stories of poets much more talented than I, dear one. I don't need to expound the way something catches in your throat when they smile at you or the glow in your chest that becomes so strong, looking at someone else, that it's a miracle the rest of the world doesn't see. Antares was not much of a fighter, but Cassian knew – Cassian *knew* – that people were not meant to be made for war and nothing else. Antares was not much of a fighter, but gods above, he was a dreamer, and Cassian snuck down to his cohort's barracks and scaled the bunks up to Antares's so many times in the months that followed just to hear the things Antares would come up with that eventually Tavius, unfortunately situated in the bunk below them, would kick at the plank above him until Cassian popped his head over to apologize. It was always easier received when Cassian was the one to speak up – hard to begrudge a prince, hard to

say no to a smile that dazzled, even in the dim light, and the two of them took advantage of it for as long as they could, Cassian staying the night and barely sneaking out before dawn.

Eventually Cassian was caught – of course he was, he'd never needed to learn the art of *sneaking* as a prince, where questions of *where are you going* or *what are you doing* could even be asked by maybe three total people in the palace (Rhia, his parents) and he was really only beholden to answering two of them (his parents).

Fortunately, as captain of the guard, Hildegarde was not put on watch – especially over something as menial as the children's barracks – with any regularity. Cassian was used to breezing past whatever teenager had been assigned their dorm and receiving either a fond hair-ruffle or a sleep-startled *uh – salve, rex* – in return.

Unfortunately, *not put on watch with any regularity* did not mean *never ever put on watch*. Cassian came down the stairs one night to find Hildegarde sat in the guard chair, languid, legs stretched across the doorway. She flipped through a book and looked decidedly unamused.

To her credit, the conversation started out much the same way. *Salve, rex*, they drawled. *And what are you doing out of bed so late?*

Cassian, unexpectedly caught and unexpectedly shamed, had given a very lofty, *I am not beholden to answer you*.

Hildegarde, completely unbothered, had stood up and snatched one of his ears between her fingers with the hand not encumbered by her book. *Yes, you are*, they said. *Try again*.

Cassian mentally updated the tally in his head (*four people that could ask him, three that actually demanded a response*) and sputtered – *to see a friend. To see – friends*.

They said, very calmly, pulling him back up the stairs, *don't be embarrassing. Make better friends. Tavius, maybe. Senix, definitely. Now go to bed. You will be an hour early to the arena and you and I will train until your cohort shows up.*

Cassian did go to bed. Cassian did meet Hildegarde early to lunge around with a sword weighted for someone much stronger than him. Cassian did, to his credit, in the days that followed, put more effort into making better friends with Tavius, who gave Cassian more pointers to fix his defense in a morning than he'd picked up on his own in months, and Senix, who, while really not one for words, had a comforting fondness for bumping up against her friends like a cat.

They were both the best in their cohort. Cassian, with extra training and talented friends, soon could no longer be justifiably called *pathetic* in a lesson again.

Antares watched, of course. His eyes were miles deep and they did not ever seem to leave Cassian.

And Cassian did not forget him. That glow still hummed his chest, caught in his throat, every time their gazes caught. He was glad that the rest of the world couldn't see it. He was fearful, always, always, that somehow, the other boy could.

–

It took him too long to work up his confidence to approach Antares again. While he wanted to please Hildegarde (oh, he did, wow, did he want a parental figure to look on him with nothing but admiration, and she sadly did kind of seem like his best bet), he missed the stories and couldn't stop feeling bad about the longing eyes Antares kept hitting him with during training. So – he stood in just a position, during one of their Hildegarde-free training sessions (the captain of the guard was across the arena, audibly grinding her teeth

at the cohort a year below theirs), that when one of the teenage soldiers paired them off for drills, he got put with Antares. And when another one of the teenage soldiers asked one of the pairs to stay behind to clean after lessons, Cassian didn't hesitate to raise his hand to volunteer the both of them.

Cassian was fifteen by this point. Antares, the oldest of their group, was sixteen – which still did not feel quite right, quite real, because he was shorter than even Cassian by a good few inches and still had that wide-eyed look of someone not quite accustomed to the world yet. *Dreamer eyes*, Cassian called them in his head.

Cassian had to be the one to break the silence, because he'd been the one to leave. *You haven't much improved*, he began, meaning to be jovial, but that was exactly the wrong sort of thing to say. Antares's shoulders went up, his mouth going thin as he stacked training blades on racks.

And you have, rex. Did you want to make sure I'd noticed?

Yes, Cassian said, meaning *yes, I want to be noticed by you* but missing his point completely and coming off more the asshole for it. He backtracked, stumbling to try and come up with something that didn't just make the situation worse. *Yes, Res, I have gotten better. At least, I like to think.*

Hmm, said Antares. *Has that made you busy?* The implication, of course, was *too busy for me*, and Cassian made a careful tally of the words unsaid and a careful-er, more secretive tally of the way his heart reacted to them.

I hadn't meant to. Stay away. Answering the question Antares had meant to ask, not the things he'd said. That should have been good enough – *princes do not say sorry*,

Hildegarde snapped, and even here Cassian was loathe to break that rule, so he added – *I don't want to again.*

Antares finished cleaning up in silence. Cassian helped, careful not to get too close, holding his breath until the other boy said – *meet me by the Enarbol, if you mean it. Tonight.*

Tonight, Cassian agreed, even though he knew tonight was a banquet night and there were foreigners visiting and that that one laird's son, that blonde boy with the rat face, was going to corner him and talk his ear off until someone else dragged him away. Even though he was loathe to disobey his parents in any capacity, even when it came to unspoken rules like *no leaving early to sneak off to meet soldier boys*. He – could get out early. For Antares, he would find a way. Maybe – if he was lucky – no one would even miss him.

–

In the grand hall, chandeliers dripped candle wax onto the heads of dancers and courtiers and performers hired for the occasion. Couples whirled in the glow and stood stiff and formal in circles around his parents. Rhia, in the seconds before he'd left, had been at sharp attention at the queen's side, trailing behind his mother like there was an invisible chain wrapped between the two of them. Cassian had passed by her room – of course, she hadn't known he was there as he did, it had been too long and too much had happened for it to be easy for him to walk inside like he'd used to – to hear her reciting to herself the poem his mother had picked out for her, halfheartedly leaning into the rhythms. Now, at the celebration following the banquet, Cassian knew that Rhia's proximity meant it was almost time for her to speak. He knew that the poem would draw eyes and attention – hopefully enough that maybe – *maybe* – no one would notice the crown prince of Rhysea making a hasty retreat into the courtyard.

Maybe.

Rhia climbed the stage. Her voice rang out, strong and clear, and as eyes turned and people gathered and his mother, surveillance mode, did not let her gaze stray from his almost-sister, checking for mistakes, Cassian turned, purposefully, and strode back the way he came. Cassian was still very bad at sneaking. He'd learned, though, how much power there was in pretending he had the right of way.

Through the hallways and out into the courtyard, where the *Enarbol* sat and waited and hummed and hummed and hummed in the way all trees do, if one bothers to listen. Circling the tree, once, twice, looking for Antares, before a figure finally slid from the dark.

Antares did not have the privilege of royal blood or even enough particular talent to pave his way. He was very good at sneaking. He melted from the dark, from the garden beyond the tree, and tilted his head towards Cassian. He did not smile, though Cassian did, strangely hesitant for the first time in years.

The two sat between two exposed roots, careful not to touch, around the backside of the tree. There was the faint noise of the party behind them, clinking glasses and sharp laughter and musicians tuning – Rhia must have finished already, Cassian did not have much time –but it did not break the peace that fell outside. Stars shone. The *Enarbol* whispered and sighed and rustled its leaves. The flowers under Cassian's fingertips – *frets-flors* – were cool as they let go of the last of the day's heat, preparing, like the rest of them, for the night ahead.

Cassian dared to speak first. *It's good to see you*, he said, and that was all it took for Antares to break his act and slam into Cassian for a hug.

Cassian buried his face into the crook of Antares' neck. He breathed in deep the other boy's smell, salt and lye soap and moonlight, and squeezed him back.

I'm sorry, Cassian said. This time, being touched like this, he was able to forget how he'd been banned from the words. He said them again, just to prove that they could exist. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It won't happen again.*

–

It didn't. Cassian kept his friendships with Tavius and Senix and the others they'd made friends with in turn. He continued to practice with Hildegarde in the mornings, treating her with the respect he knew they deserved, but when Cassian chose Antares first for the casual patrols their cohort had started being sent on or slid in beside him at the evening meals he took twice a week with his soldiers, Cassian did not tolerate disapproval from Hildegarde. He was the prince, after all. He was everything he was supposed to be. He could have this, too.

And – the captain of the guard didn't say a word against him. That first time he'd dared to call Antares' name, he'd met their eyes, steady and sure, ready for challenge, but she'd just – smiled thinly and gave a single, sharp nod of their head. Whether or not they approved, Cassian had made the decision like a prince – like a king – and that had been the thing she'd wanted most out of him. Surety of his place in the world.

And – with that approval, they'd both gotten bold. Cassian stopped sneaking down and instead came to collect Antares for walks around the palace grounds. He picked bouquets of wildflowers and dried them upside-down to leave in the boy's trunk or at the end of his bed or on his pillow. He let Antares pull him, joyously, through his life, card games and company for the watches he was put on outside of the youngest cohorts' barracks. Life

turned glorious as Cassian turned sixteen – they celebrated with honey cakes, him and Antares, the party that was meant for Cassian raging inside the ballroom and the two of them sat tucked into the roots of the *Enarbol* – but, of course, dear one, times like that don't last forever. Sixteen was the age child-soldiers lost the modifier, and as Cassian, the youngest of his cohort, turned sixteen, their group received their adult swords, engraved with their names if nothing else (Cassian had gotten his a year early, a gift from his parents for his remarkable turnaround with his swordsmanship), a complete set of armor, and adult vocations. Surely, they were divided into fighting units and slowly, they were sent out on raids.

It is important to note, dear one, that adulthood does not grant one extra knowledge or skill. It is also important to note that even when a fighting unit functions as such – a unit – not all soldiers are equal within it. Some have the privilege and protection of princehood. And some, despite being born for war and nothing else, never turn out to be very good soldiers at all.

I do not know how much of what comes next is worth accounting – not for lack of importance but because we all can hazard a guess at where this story ends. Antares was good at telling stories and sneaking into the kitchens and pulling on Cassian's curls in a way that suggested an affection even a talented storyteller couldn't ever succinctly name. He was good at calming the younger children down when summer thunderstorms rolled through and smiling through the hard stuff, the parts that hurt Cassian even years down the line. He was good at making his prince laugh, not out of amusement but delight. He was very good at making Cassian's heart stutter like it hadn't in all of the years before he'd turned sixteen.

He was not good with a sword. He was not good at confronting people he did not already know.

Where could this story have gone, had Antares been better? Maybe by the time the prophecy comes into play, Cassian seventeen and hoping, hoping, hoping as he hears of the *Eligida*, that she is the same age as him, that destiny has not passed him by, Antares could have helped him move past that. Maybe Cassius Rex would have been okay with *Cassian*, full stop, *Cassian of Rhysea*, *Cassian the-true-and-brave-and-strong*.

But – you know where this story picks up, dear one. Cassian had meant what he said, that night at the *Enarbol*. *I'm sorry. I won't leave you again*. He'd meant to keep that promise the rest of his life.

It's – just –

It's impossible to keep, of course, when one dies young.

It shouldn't have been a bad raid. It was Cassian and twelve others, a good number, a dozen plus one more for luck, and it was supposed to be a check-up. They were to make sure the rebels had cleared out, that the townspeople were calm, and that nothing important had been burned. They found, however, the raggedy group still packing.

Cassian couldn't remember who struck first. He couldn't remember who even *struck* Antares – he'd been too busy focusing on his screaming lungs and shaking muscles to see, but he'd just turned around in time to hear a strangled cry of – *Cas* – to see Antares, on the ground, one of the rebels over him with their sword raised.

No, Cassian roared, but he was too far away and he was not magic. He could not stop their actions with a whisper or word. So the blade slunk, right down, into Antares's chest,

and Cassian, too caught up in his own fight to have turned around sooner, was too late to stop them.

Somehow he made it across the clearing, blind terrified haze, and fell to Antares' side. Tavius and Senix found their way over, cutting their way through, back to back, but Cassian could hardly process them as he fell. There was just Antares, choking, chest turning red too quickly, and Cassian was on his knees beside him.

You're not allowed to go, Cassian managed, voice already thick around tears. No. No. I said I wouldn't leave you behind. Not again.

Antares tried to smile. There's always the next life. Find me there.

That's not fair, Cassian said. Res. Res, no. That's not fair.

This was a moment that Cassian, in the few years that followed, tried desperately to remember as less than it was. Some things about people – stupid, sideways of romantic – stuck in your brain. Like nicknames you kept after their givers were gone and the way you tied your boots and opening strategies to card games that required you to think five steps ahead. And some things about people – the important things, the things that would make your chest crumble if you actually let them sit in your head – those are easier to try and forget.

This was one of the times Cassian wanted, so badly, to forget.

Antares lifted his head and pressed a kiss, feather-light, against Cassian's lips. See you someday. Don't make it soon.

Cassian held Antares as his heart stopped.

The battle ended, sometime after that. The clanging of swords and shouting became footsteps running away, became labored breathing, became silence. His soldiers – his

friends – circled around him, waiting for orders from their prince. Their prince knew, in the back of his head, that he was supposed to be getting up now. He was supposed to do a damage report. He was supposed to guide his soldiers.

Lead, little prince. Maybe it was Hildegarde's voice in his ears. Maybe it was his mother's. Maybe it was his own. *Get off the ground. Stop bowing before someone that was so far below you.*

No, he thought. *No*.

But there were people waiting for him to lead. And Cassian would always have to be a prince first.

It was what he was made for. There was no use trying to be something more than what you were made for.

He stayed on the ground and allowed himself five deep breaths. Cassian tried to wipe tears from his face with the backs of wrists, then nearly wretched as his palms still somehow managed to smear blood across his cheeks. Cassian steadied himself, chest tight, wanting to scream and scrub at his skin until there was no trace of what had happened still on him.

But he had to be a prince, first. So Cassian stood, and as calmly as he could manage, said, *burn their bodies*.

Tavius's shoulders hunched. *Cas?*

Cassian did not look at Antares' body, but he felt every muscle tense. *Not him. Don't touch him. The rebels. Burn them.*

—

I told you, dear one. I told you not to expect too much. We know where this story picks up, and Antares is not there to see it.

Winter set in and Cassian learned to sleep on his own again. Spring came around and he had gotten used to the raids, had gotten good at pushing his advantages, maintaining a cool head. By the time the summer arrived, Cassian turning seventeen and beginning to hold his breath and hope for the prophecy to come true in his lifetime, he'd gotten very good at forgetting that, sometimes, the role people pushed you into was not the one that was good for you. Doubt, after all, was for people not born as kings. It is so drilled into them, that idea of glorious destiny, that they cannot help but believe in it.

By the time the Eligida had arrived, Cassian did not doubt again. He knew what doubting got you. And by the time his soldier began coming along on raids, trailing and uncertain, with even less time spent with a sword in her hand than Antares had, Cassian had gotten very good at turning around before the people he loved could fall.

But you know this part, dear one. What is there to say? There's not a lesson. There's not one that ever really mattered, in the end. All the work was undone before it even really began.

[FX: The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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You are so, so very loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Back Again, Back Again: Running and a Reckoning

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode three: Running and a Reckoning.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: We left out the back of the tent amid a gaggle of the performers, doing our best to blend in. The festival was chaos - evidently, the kings had managed to muster the guard between the time we'd left and now. They stormed through the streets, and although I couldn't well understand their shouting, all brusque Rhysean, there were two words I could parse well enough.

Eligida.

And - *absere*. Missing.

In a break between guards on the street, we split off from the group, Callia's hand in a vice grip around my wrist, and

wound through the streets, doubling back towards the woods and, beyond and through, the long way out towards the countryside. We were so close - I could see the point where streets tapered abruptly into forest - when, galloping around the corner on a pale white horse came -

Cassian.

But not Cassian *my* Cassian. Cassian, dressed for battle. Cassian, helmet pulled low over his head to obscure his eyes and cradle his cheeks.

Omen of death, no? *Pale white horse?*

Mask or no, I knew it was him without ever having to see his face. And, ever the fool, despite everything, despite everything despite *everything*, because the second-to-last choice he made was to choose *me*, I couldn't help but be grateful he was *alive*.

But, all the same, that didn't mean I wanted him to see me. I reached up to grab the edges of my scarf to make sure it hadn't slipped from around my face and averted my eyes. Callia still had hold of my arm, and she tugged me back by my elbow, out of the prince's path, out of the way of two soldiers, neither of which were Hildegarde.

And that - maybe I did feel a spark of shame for what I'd done to her.

Gazes low. Averted glances and backs to the walls along with the others on the street as the prince rode by, dressed for

death. A mother clutched at the elbows of her two young daughters not much unlike Callia did to me, and as they tried to get out of the way, tried to put their backs to the brick and bow, to get on their knees, if necessary, one of the little girls tumbled into me.

Without thinking, I dropped one hand to her shoulder to try and keep her small head from cracking against the brick.

But then the magic - my magic - sparked in me, and my heart sank.

No, I thought. *Oh no, oh no. Not now. Not this.* It hadn't happened more than a handful of times before - I touched someone, magic, long-buried in their blood, sparked back into existence, daughter of a daughter of a daughter of a witch of Rhysea, but - this was not the time. This was not the time. This would give us away.

The little girl gasped, breath hitching in a one-two. Her eyes shot up to mine, wide and wondering, and they glowed golden-bright for a moment and two and three. The magic connected us, and the longer I held on the more I could feel it growing, looking to wrap both of us into something like the beacon of light I'd become after pulling my sword from the *enarbol*.

Eligi- she started to say, her mouth forming the word, but I *shhhhed* her, as quietly as I could, taking my free arm from

where it clutched my hood to put it to my lips. I dropped my head down to my chest and closed my eyes, trying hard to dampen the magic in my chest, and barely managed to pull the glow into something that could be played off as a trick of the light.

So long as -

we -

all -

kept -

still.

Cassian paused, gaze - the place his gaze *should* be, *would* be beneath his helmet - raking over us. I hardly dared to glance up at him beneath my eyelashes, my shoulders hunched and chin tilted down into something that could be taken, in this context, as a sign of respect, rather than fear. The girl's breath caught again as one of her hands reached out wide for her mother's.

Don't look too hard, I thought. Don't look too hard, because you'll see her and then you'll see me and you know the way I stand. You'll realize what is odd, and you'll reevaluate, and you'll know that you are not mistaken. Let us go. Let us be. Help me, one last time.

He stared. Kept - staring -

If any of you see the Eligida, he said, carefully, tell her to come home.

And then he pushed his heels into his horse, and they continued down the street.

The palace was on fire, the last we'd seen of it. It didn't take me long to guess what - who - he meant by *home*.

I hesitated. Callia kicked my shin, grabbing my arm and hissing into my ear. *If you're running back to your prince, eligidida, do it now. Choose your side.*

I chose, I snapped back, pulled from my stupor. *I chose you. I'll always choose you.* I knelt down, shrugging off Callia's arm, and looked the little girl in her eyes.

My magic - I said, slowly. *Yours now, too. I think. You need words, to use it. Be careful.*

I didn't know what she would have, if it would be all of the magic or just a bit, if she would be able to do all the things that I could or if there would be just a word and an action to make her own. I demonstrated sliding my hands past each other, the light glowing dim in my palms. *Now you.*

She copied, and just a spark - a spark - whispered over her fingers. She gasped, eyes going wide.

What - Callia started, but the phrase became something I couldn't understand. *How did* -

Your mother, I interrupted, pointing. *Take care of her.*

Callia stared. And then, hot and furious, she started in on me. I caught next to none of it but *leave* and *child* and

responsibility, the emphasis placed on a different syllable than the kings' accent, and I had to run it through my head three separate times to be sure I'd gotten what she'd said.

What? I tried. *I don't understand -*

She threw her hands in the air and turned to the girl's mother. This was a bit easier to parse - she said it as though she were talking to a wild horse. Expecting her to bolt.

We can care for her. She has the magic.

Magic - the word for it in Rhysean falls something a bit closer to *blood gift* or *talent*, translated literally. I add in the word *the*, now, listeners, to try and make that clear. *The magic.*

Callia raised an eyebrow at me, nodding at the mother, and I offered my hands out towards her. *You, too?*

She hesitantly stepped forward, stretched her fingertips out.

I waited for the magic to spark.

Nothing happened. The world stayed quiet. *I did not make her*, she said with a small smile. City accent, easier to understand. *But she is my daughter all the same.* She turned to Callia. *I will not let you take her. And I will not leave my home.*

Oh - so that's what Callia had meant, all those words I couldn't understand. But what would we have done with a child?

How would a group of people never more than what seemed like five seconds from getting killed raise a little girl?

Callia pursed her lips. *You know the bar, Eligidanim Traem?*

The woman nodded.

If you change your mind. Bring her there. Lower, she added – *do not let her shout her magic just yet. Not until we make the world safe.*

And then Callia was pulling me away, and I had just enough time to turn and drag a closed fist across my shoulders before we whipped around a corner and they disappeared from sight.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. “Nightingales” once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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I hope you have a wonderful day.

Back Again, Back Again: Nonbeliever

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode four:
Nonbeliever

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: We made it out of the city. Day faded into night - we slept in a barn, Callia and I, neither of us particularly trusting of the other to keep watch and neither of us particularly wanting to lay our head too close to the other. Hay is not comfortable, I learned, despite how it seemed in the movies, but it was safe. Safer. Better than what I'd left behind.

Where are the others? I asked her in the dark. *When will we meet them again?* The second part, as it was me and all of my Rhysean was shitty and disjointed, came out more, *we are going to meet them again, yes?*

What I *really* had meant was, *where is Rhia? Is Rhia alright?* I do not want to be separated from her. I want to make sure she knows that I care, but that both required more words than I could confidently drum up and also more emotional vulnerability than I was willing to sacrifice to Callia.

I tried to remind myself that last I had seen Rhia, Iolo had her, and Iolo would take better care of her than I ever could. Had - had taken better care. Had staged an entire rescue for her - I wasn't stupid enough to pretend it was for me. I was a lot of things, and *sensible* was once again making its way onto the list. I understood that if there was a way to cut me out of the prophecy, to cut me out of the deal - if I wasn't magic, if I couldn't awaken little sparks of magic, if my existence here wasn't fucking *foretold* - it would have been so much easier for them to get rid of me, or ignore me, or - kill me - and make their own chosen three. To - not have to coddle someone barely passable with a sword. Not have to pretend to like someone who had killed their friends and still sort of loved the boy they loathed more than all else.

Who would I have chosen? If it were up to me? If I wasn't a part of the prophecy, but some bystander, leaning over readjusting fate. Leander - even if they hadn't been magic. Rhia - she would be me, the better me. She would rule and it would be good and just, because she was, because she knew how to be

gentler and kinder than me in a way that made everyone else want to create the same sort of light. And - Callia?

Callia.

Callia, who *knew* me even if she didn't understand me in the slightest. Callia, who'd fought her way up two flights of stairs in an enemy castle and still managed to make her way back down. Callia, who the *fretim*, clearly, believed in. Callia, who Rhia had believed in. Callia, who could pick up my sword. Callia, who was - awake.

Still.

It was supposed to be my turn on watch, but Callia wasn't asleep. One hand was still tensed around the hilt of the dagger at her thigh; the other twisted a piece of straw around her fingers. Her eyes were half-lidded, but that was enough. She was still alert, didn't trust me not to let my guard down. I might as well have taken advantage of it.

My sword, I finally said, into the dark.

She closed her eyes and settled back further. *I am asleep, eligidida.*

No, you're not, I said, wishing I knew how to fit *clearly* into that sentence. Wishing I knew how to form something, anything, other than only the most utilitarian of sentences. *We're talking. My sword. You can* - I didn't know the words for *pick it up*. I couldn't remember where the word *it* would go in

the sentence, anyways. Before the verb? Attached to the end?

Lamely, I repeated, *you can lift my sword.*

She sighed, a long, over-exaggerated thing through her nose, and muttered something to herself. *Is that* - something I didn't know - *unique*? Sarcasm, in the couple of times I'd heard it from Rhia or Cassian in Rhysean, had sounded like this. There was a tonal shift that happened that we don't have in English - the way you emphasized the first syllables of words. It almost added another layer to the barb - *in case you're too slow to catch on, I'm making fun of you right now.*

I pretended not to notice. Yes, I said, playing at earnest. *But - I believe that you know that.*

Callia sighed again, unimpressed, so I added, *you're magic.*

A confirmation. Not a question.

She sat up, annoyance coating her action, and I realized with a jolt that her eyes - gold - glowed strangely in the dark. No - not *glowed*. But - it was dark in this barn, no light save for the sliver of moonlight through the hayloft window, and yet her irises glinted in the low light. Almost reflective - but that wasn't right either. It was - *unnatural* in the definition of *not normally occurring, not a product of here*. It was *unnatural* in the definition of *I can't explain it, because it was magic*. The *magic*.

Again, I felt that tug in my chest.

Which one? I asked. Soldier, or king?

Her lip curled. I'm not - enautoeligidae, she spat, staring daggers at me. Rex et poeta et soldat, it's nonsense. It breeds tyrants and false prophets.

I sat back in shock. What?

Callia snorted a laugh, an awful thing that came from memories of betrayal. She spoke slowly, painfully simply, as if she knew how stupid I was and wanted to be sure I understood. You cannot expect a children's story to save this world. It was a kind lie that the people created and your prometide et tyrannus took and made their own. Where did they find you, Eligidida, with your hair? Much, much further north? Where have they been hiding you all this time? I am not stupid enough to think there is a beyond here. I am not stupid enough to believe you are from another world. I am not stupid enough to believe in arborellems.

The heat that flushed my face soured something in my chest, made it go rotten and spill bile across the back of my throat. You - don't know me. That was, in fact, precisely the wrong thing to say.

She cackled, but the joy had been scrubbed from the act. Mirth sat thick in her voice. How right you are! I know nothing of you, eligidida, and I don't trust you besides. I am not stupid enough to think that we do not need you - we need the

support of any people we can find. But I am not naive enough to believe you are anything more than a stupid little child. You are not a savior. You are enautoeligidae that so many have confused for something greater.

This word again, I snapped, enautoeligidae. The remnants of my own title rang through it, but that made me more nervous, with the way she spat it out. I could hear my voice, almost a whine, almost a plea, mostly an embarrassment, as I confessed, I don't know what it means.

Loathing. From the sliver of hayloft moonlight that cut her face into fragments, I watched half her mouth twist into something part frown and part sneer and part dreadful, angry confirmation of a suspected truth. That gives me no surprise, she said snidely. It is someone who struts around, thinking they are saving others who were fine on their own and the fool had no business saving.

But I'm - "foretold," I wanted to say, but didn't have the word. The sour feeling returned, an inkling that she may have been a little bit right. But I - I tried again, and this time it came out closer to a whine. I didn't know enough words to have this conversation and have it well. I hated that she was right, that there was nothing I could do to disprove that one little statement, I am not surprised. I'd been struggling to keep up

the entire time I'd been with her. How sheltered I was. How little I truly knew.

I wished, for a second, a millisecond, before shutting it down, that I had Cassian with me to talk through it all, for a comforting voice. Then I remembered what he had done, and what I had done, and the reason Rhia and I were separated and the reason the smell of smoke had folded itself into our clothes and carried with us all this way. I told myself I did not want Cassian with me, and sidetracked.

You don't believe in magic. I tried to do the sarcasm-thing - over-emphasizing the first syllables of the words to try and get across in my tone what I didn't actually have the words to say. Meaning - *you're joking, saying you don't believe in magic.*

Callia snorted. *I know of the witches and nature and the magic that comes from that. I believe in magic, eligidida. I don't believe in prophecy. Maybe you are magic. Magic is true. Arborellems are not.*

This word again, I repeated. I'd already lost my dignity, and this one, at least, did not seem like an insult. There was nothing to lose by asking. *Arborellems. I don't know it, as well.*

Either, she corrected. The word she used was *Anet. Convocil,* "anet" a "coque." Say, "anet," not "coque." Say, "I don't know it, either," not, "I don't know it, as well."

I filed that information away but shook my head, not that it mattered. The moon disappeared behind a cloud, or traveled out of view of the hayloft, and we were in the dark of all but her eyes once more. *Yes. Anet. I don't know it, either. It sounds like... tree. Arbol.*

Mmm, she said. *I grow tired of your questions, Eligidida.* She started her sentence with something I didn't understand, and then - *the kings - hide - trust - like to keep secrets.*

I didn't catch that, I sighed, frustrated, but she slammed herself back down into the hay - there was no other way to describe it but *slammed*, it was a *slam*, violent and annoyed and deliberately turned so her back was towards me.

I do not care. I am sleeping, eligidida.

Well, I thought, pedantically. *She trusts me enough for me to not run a sword through her back. That's progress.*

I bit my lip, none of my questions answered, but put one hand back to the hilt of my sword and let the hum of it comfort me as I resumed my watch.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that this world always tries to make you feel more alone than you truly are. There are people out there that will love you without condition or expectation, and you will find them. The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. You are so, so very loved.

I hope you have a wonderful day.

There's no Christmas in Rhysea.

This is obvious: there is no Christianity, no god of everything and holy son in Rhysea. There is no Saturnalia to send into obscurity with the introduction of Christmas; there was no creeping campaign for the erasure of pagan ways. So no Christmas; no Hanukkah, no Kwanza or even Saturnalia. But there are seasons in Rhysea, same as here, that mark about the same time as they do here, and even Rhysea celebrates the Longest Night.

Hold your friends tight, hold the people you love close, and sing, we're halfway, halfway, halfway out of the dark, my dears. The Longest Night marks the halfway point of the year -- the Longest Day is the new year, with the Rhysean idea that the world builds and builds itself into an epoch to usher in the new, making our summer solstice when they change their calendar year. It's a time of reflection and change, of evaluation of the good and the bad and the prompting of, *what will bear me through the other half of this cold season? What will see me through the darkness?*

It's a popular day for weddings and proposals, for children to be made when the answer to that question is *love, love*. It's meant to be a reflection on your mental peace and state as much as it is a check to your winter stores, a calculation of rations and reason. *So long as we don't exceed two jars a week of preserves, we should be able to last until we can plant new fruits once more. I've found myself drifting and spiraling, and I know that this worry can be alleviated with a stricter routine and a trip to the shore.*

Hold your friends tight, hold the people you love close, and sing, we're halfway, halfway, halfway out of the dark, my dears.

The tradition is to eat toast, scorched black on one side, and golden-pale on the other, with an egg, runny-yolked, cracked over the top of the golden side like a bit of sun.

Halfway dark, halfway back to the light. The tradition is to listen to stories from whatever bards happen through your town that night, and to feed them and offer them a place to rest. They will sing of days gone by, and all the good things that are sure to come, and you will give them a night of comfort and peace in return. The tradition is, if you're with a king, to host a feast where the room is so ablaze with candles that it seems to be summer already. The tradition is, if you're in a village or in a camp, with the Fretim, to build the biggest bonfire you can and host a party around it with those you call *friend*. The tradition is, no matter what path you walk, to light a candle when the night reaches its darkest, and to lift them up towards the sky as you throw your wants to the world, and sing, *we're halfway, halfway, halfway out of the dark, my dears*.

I hope that you have a wonderful day. You are so, so loved.

Back Again, Back Again: Quiet

Abigail, as the preroll: Hello hello hello! Before we begin today's episode, we have a listener limerick. If you, too, would like a definitely terrible and very silly limerick written for you and read out on the show about an (arguably) pg-13 topic of your choice, you, too, can go to Ko-Fi.com/BackAgainPodcast or click the link in the description to jump directly to the page. This one is for Tapac, about Penguins.

Though stuck on the ground despite wings

They are deft at many great things

They fish quite like pros

And keep lifelong bros

Plus can tap-dance quite cool as they sing

Thank you so so much for your support!! And - onto the episode!

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode five:

Quiet

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Something I have discovered, after being away for six years and back for one:

It's noisy, in our world. Even when you think there's silence. Even when you think there's peace.

Right now, you're listening to my voice, distorted by time and distance and old equipment. There's the click of my microphone, aforementioned old equipment: a shitty thing rescued from the back corner of an antique store. There's the ambience that you're hearing, now, that's mine, the product of my new environment: cars on the highway or a plane going by. I don't live far from an airport, and I don't live far from a bay, and both are no strangers to passing and landing planes.

Outside of that, there's the sounds of my neighbors above and around me. Their footsteps, their voices, their own lives played out through the thin walls. We live on top of one another, stacked like building blocks, always aware of how much noise we make. We create our own auditory panopticon - you never know who is listening. You are always surrounded by people who could be listening. Then there is your own ambience, dear listeners, your own constant companions of sound that accompany

my voice: perhaps the hum of the fridge, the hiss of the radiator. Perhaps your own neighbors or planes or roommates, the breathing of the people that share your space. The cars that drive by with their music so loud it shakes the walls. The sound of children playing outside.

But there is more than that, too. The things that we cannot stop, their existence and their production out of our control. The things that we do not *hear* so much as *sense*, that we don't ever process. That we don't even know we are knowing until you are in a place without them. The movement of satellites, far above. Radio waves traveling through the air. The plane, not directly above , but at a cruising altitude of twenty thousand feet over your head.

It is never silent here, not even in the middle of the woods. I've tried to find it, that silence: I moved here, and I drove my car to Mt. Saint Helens, two tanks of gas round-trip at inflated west-coast prices, which would have been worth it as I hiked and hiked, gasping in my out-of-shape body until it was midnight and I was mostly lost - I wasn't even supposed to be there after dark that late in the park - but it would have been worth it if only I was far away from any people and all *noise*.

I thought. I thought. But it was not silent. You do not realize how loud they are, all these things humans have made, until you are in a place without them.

Maybe - maybe we had magic, at one point, long ago, and if we were only quiet enough we would be able to hear the trees whisper.

But it is pointless to wonder. Because it will never be silent again.

(Silence)

It's overwhelming. The noise. I would give all the breath in my lungs to know five seconds of peace.

(Silence.)

It was not a rendezvous point we had been aiming towards. It was the rebel's camp. It took another two days to reach, trekking through the woods, tired and dirty and worried for Rhia, because *if I was having this much trouble, how was she? if I was dirty and covered in scratches, was her eye - the place her eye had been - fine? Was it infected?* I hoped it wasn't infected. I didn't know what people did here, when magic didn't knit them whole and leave the pain in its place.

That hike, those long days, were where I first learned about silence - true silence, complete silence.

But everything ends. Even perpetual travel. And after making it through the woods, over a stream, out onto what became the edge of the plains, we came to - the camp.

I do not know what I had expected. Callia had been cryptic at best, confrontational at worst, when I'd eventually realized

that she was not taking us to meet back up with the others, but to make our way back on our own. I don't know why she'd done it - to see if I was trustworthy, to see if I was hiding something, to see if, once faced with hard ground and an empty belly, I would turn tail and run back to the life I'd left - but I didn't.

And so - she brought me home.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

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I hope you have a wonderful day.

Back Again, Back Again: Homecoming

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode six:
Homecoming

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

If you asked me about a *rebel camp in a portal realm*, I would have described to you Aslan's How - the way Disney made it, in the movies, all red-and-gold domed tents and mythical creatures, regal and noble. Despite being made up of refugees and half-trained fighters and outcasts, I would have painted the *fretim* camp as a place where all were vivid, well-armored, unquestionable heroes. Armor would be stamped not with Aslan's gentle face but our Rhysean equivalent, flowers and stars and sunlight. Forges would intersperse the edges of the camp to ensure no one was without protection and no one was unable to protect. No one would be hungry. Everyone would be trusting. Everyone would have no doubt that they were doing right, and

everyone would be certain their mission would prove fruitful. You know - *The rebels will succeed, the rebels will make this world whole. Cair Paravel will be restored and Aslan will breathe life back into this place.*

The *fretim* was not made like that. There were no red-and-gold tents or domed roofs - that would have been a waste of fabric and a waste of dye. Tents - because this was a permanent place, tents were abundant, tents were a plea to the fates to *make* them permanent, to stick around - were made of burlap and rough brown canvas. There were no forges, no well-armored soldiers - metal was expensive, metal cost so much money and food was hard enough to have enough of, especially when the few mines in Rhysea were guarded by soldiers and all their residents that would have wanted to help fight back were under a watch akin to a prison camp. Here, food was a luxury, and so new metal was an impossibility.

The people were more than a little haggard. The people looked less than a little noble.

I froze at the edge of the camp, staring through the tents at the path into the clearing. It had rained the night before, and the ground was so well-trodden that the big center clearing was not far off from being a mud pit, sludge threatening to pull off your boots. Callia, unphased, continued on before eventually she realized I wasn't following.

I hadn't meant to freeze. I'd just - I'd been expecting Aslan's How. Sure, they were working against the kings, sure, I'd seen firsthand how underequipped they could be, but -

Callia turned back around to face me, and I could see in her stare that I'd failed another test. *What were you expecting, eligidida? Jewels?*

We both knew that wasn't what I *had* been expecting, but she was daring me to say something, eyes hard, lip just barely starting to curl. *Disgust*, or maybe *embarrassment* marred her face - but not an embarrassment that came from self-consciousness. An embarrassment that came from having to be around me. It was, unfortunately, the expression I'd become most acquainted with on her face.

Part of me wanted to say *a fighting chance*, but that was both unnecessarily cruel and - untrue. It took an enormous amount of strength to organize something like this. It took an enormous amount of strength to stay alive as long as they had.

I didn't take the bait. I simply raised my chin like Cassian taught me and pretended I had never faltered at all.

The stares of the people within the clearing as we made our way to the center varied wildly between curious and caustic. No one tried to hide that they were staring, either. Off on my left, a training circle had paused in their exercises to watch, and I recognized the girl leading the exercise - recognized her,

that is, from one of the raids Cassian and I had gone on. I'd killed another girl on that raid. The dagger I'd taken from her at the end of it - because, of course, the bodies were stripped for weapons to ensure the *fretim* didn't just lose fighters but blades, too, burning away even the magpie instinct of salvaging what was left - wasn't even with me.

It was in Cassian's room. I'd spent that night with Cassian, because I hadn't wanted to be *alone* and he'd been there, at that battle, had known what I'd seen and had seen it, too. Because that raid was one we'd gone on after moonlights and rooftops and *let me tell you everything I know*, and instead of giving Rhia the truth of the battle, of where we'd been going, I'd told her a lie about diplomacy and a dinner at the house of one of the lairds. I'd taken my armor with me. Rhia wasn't a fool. She knew my purpose in that castle. My purpose when I was finally let outside of it.

To inspire fear.

I'd taken the girl's dagger because it was well-made. It likely had been stolen from the palace in the first place, Cassian had told me. The castle was where it belonged. With time, I would have learned to use it.

But that would be another lie I'm telling you. The reason for taking the girl's dagger. The swords went back into circulation

with the soldiers, yes, but the palace guard did not use daggers with any regularity.

It was a trophy. You know this, I know this. Let's not pretend at otherwise. And I hadn't even - remembered it, remembered that I'd taken it, remembered where I'd left it, until I saw her face.

Trophy. What is a trophy if it honors nothing? If the owner forgets its existence?

I'm not sure. But it falls far away from anything that can be misconstrued as *glory*.

I did, in Rhysean, know the word for *killer*. And the friend of the girl I'd killed clearly recognized me, eyes narrowing. I watched her mouth it, the word, *killer*, and watched the way the rest of those crowded around her clutched their weapons or practice poles just a little bit tighter.

Killer. Well - we say *killer*. In English. But in Rhysean, there aren't a myriad of ways to say *killer* like there are in English, a thousand thousand shades of gray. In Rhysean, there are exactly two: defender - *guardare* - and *deskina* - killer. Black and white - two words, each well-honed and finely sharpened, ready to draw blood.

Defender: someone who protects their land or family or friends when they are attacked and invaded. *Defender:* someone who is protecting an ideology or a faraway leader, perceived

threatened. You can kill without being a *killer*. You can kill without it becoming an aspect of *being*. *To kill*: verb, impermanent, an action taken.

Killer: adjective. A condemnation.

In English, the word assigned or hurled or stamped on a file is determined by the perceived worth of the person killed. *Murderer*, of innocents or children or someone defenseless. *Killer*, for the gray area between *accidental death* and *intentional harm*. *Assassin*, when a political figure or celebrity or star, someone with a cult or cult of personality, is killed. *Hero*, when those deciding assign the dead no humanity at all.

In Rhysean, it's not different, I suppose. Just - no shades of gray. You are righteous. Or - you are guilty, a stone added to your soul so it will slam your heart to the floor when it is weighed against a feather.

Deskina, the girl murmured, and the sound carried on the wind. I tensed. Callia's eyes flicked to the girl. I hoped, for a wild moment, that she would reproach the girl. Defend my honor, because I didn't know enough to be able to do it myself.

Callia walked over to the girl and pulled her into an embrace. The girl's sword clattered to the dirt, and she threw her arms around Callia's neck. Callia hugged her tighter. It seemed to last forever, this display of affection. It felt like I shouldn't have been watching. *Haast*, Callia finally said in

place of any reproach for my sake. Not that I'd expected her to, by this point. *Good to see you.*

You survived - something, something I didn't catch, this girl's accent was thick - *kings*.

Sic. Eligidida sians - Callia shot a glance back at me, lip curled, already having sensed how intently I was listening. She switched, then, to that odd slanted-Rhysean that the performers had used. Haast laughed, at whatever she said, but it wasn't a particularly kind laugh.

I know that you're talking about me, I snapped in Rhysean, so tired of language being used as a weapon. *Say it to my face.*

It didn't come out that smoothly, and I sounded foolish. Haast and Callia wore matching expressions of disgust.

I said, Haast purred, stepping around Callia, talking slowly and clearly, *that you are a worthless little* -

Ilyaas, someone gasped behind me, and I spun around to find the voice, not daring to get my hopes up.

Rhia.

She fell from one of the tents, Iolo hot on her heels - she stumbled, and although I darted to catch her, Iolo was there first, blocking my path and giving Rhia her arm to cling to. I didn't care that Iolo didn't want me there. I grabbed her free hand, squeezed it, lifted a hand to cup her chin like she'd done to me a thousand times before.

My thumb caught on the edge of the bandage that covered the place her eye had been. Rhia spooked, jerking her chin out of my hand, and nearly fell again, clinging wildly to my hand and Iolo's arm.

Eligidida - Callia snapped from behind me, and grabbed my shoulder. *Leave her alone.*

No, Rhia said, and shook her head. Her voice was harder than it had been a couple of days ago. Pain ages you, I guess. No, *it's fine.* And then, in English, to me - *I just - don't touch it, okay?*

Of course, I said automatically. I almost, foolishly, said, *I'm glad you're alright,* but caught my tongue at the last moment and froze. It was harder to get out the right words. I wanted her to understand the extent of them, that they stretched beyond this moment and went back, and back, to the moment I said *fretim* in front of Cassian and the moment I accidentally traded her eye for a signal. Because really, the 'accidentally' didn't matter. It had happened, no matter my intention. *I - I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to happen like this.*

A memory that's seared into my brain: Rhia's lip, for half a second, curled into something like hatred, something like disgust, and she was a stranger to me and I was justifiable enemy. Her grip tightened on my hand, nails digging in. *But it did.*

I started, mouth half-open, starting and just as quickly ending a thousand thousand sentences.

The common tongue, please? Callia said brusquely. *Not all of us are pretty and royal.*

I said I am glad to see her, Rhia said. *And Ilyaas said the same.*

That was enough for me to realize: they didn't know I was the reason she'd lost her eye. I was already on shaky enough ground with the *Fretim*. Even when there was part of her that was unable to forgive me my actions, Rhia still didn't betray me in this strange place.

There was no part of me that deserved her.

Rhia pushed me off of her and back towards Callia and Haast, though neither of them seemed particularly thrilled at that. Haast recoiled, picking her sword back up from the ground. Slowly - for my benefit, slowly - Rhia said, in Rhysean, *find her new clothes. Make her look like one of us.*

She's not, Haast growled.

She is here, no? Not with the false rex et poeta et soldat. Not with Cassian. Do you remember why I escaped?

Iolo raised an eyebrow. *Remember why you were in trouble at all?*

Rhia's jaw set, and I could tell she was fighting the urge to grind her teeth together. Deliberately, she said, *This is*

meaningless without trust. We must work together if we want to have any chance of success.

I realized, as she crossed her arms over her chest, just how much weight Rhia had among these people, for them to hear her out. She was powerful in a quiet way. The kind that, once all she meant was laid out on the table before you, was hard to resist. And she believed in this cause - believed in *me*. What I was capable of.

Even after everything.

I will not - Haast began, voice harsh - and then, something I couldn't understand - *killer*.

That, at least, made it fairly easy to fill in the gaps. I got ready to snarl something terrible back, *Well, I don't want to be seen around the friend of such a terrible fighter, but we all have to do things we don't want*, but Callia didn't give me a chance to lose my temper and make my standing even worse among these people. Bless her.

To Rhia - *Fine. We will find her new clothes*. I did not miss how she neatly stepped around the phrase *we will work together*. Callia was not sold on me, but this was a step.

Please do, Rhia said, and, grabbing Iolo's hand, pulled the other girl back into their tent.

Callia's eyes lingered for a moment at the flaps of the tent, not quite *staring daggers* but something close. She seemed to make a decision. To Haast - *Where is Natolia?*

Haast rolled her eyes and said something I didn't understand, but it was enough for Callia. She gestured impatiently to me - *come, eligidida* - and then we were off, pounding through the camp, and I kept checking back over my shoulder at the tent that held my best friend and someone I might have treated too lightly one too many times, and the clearing, full of people who knew everything I'd done - that was the scariest part of it, that they didn't need to embellish how reprehensible I was, that was the scariest part of it, that I'd become someone that the word *killer*, in Rhysean, could be branded onto, and it twisted my stomach not because it was untrue, but because it was *right*.

This was not the homecoming I'd imagined, back when it was just Rhia and I on the roofs, telling stories and dreaming up new futures. It was closer to the one I deserved.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show,

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that this world always tries to make you feel more alone than you truly are. There are people out there that will love you without condition or expectation, and you will find them. The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. You are so, so very loved.

I hope you have a wonderful day.